This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com



Great Britain. War Office.
Tunisia.

GREAT BRITAIN. WAR OFFICE. TUNISIA.

D
766.99*
T8G7

Digitized by Google

LIBRARY
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Digitized by Google

RECEIVED
JAN 12 1945
ARMY LIBRARY

O. S. U.
WAR INFOR...
CENTER



THE ARMY AT WAR

TUNISIA

OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY

PRINTED & PUBLISH...
IN GREAT BRITAIN

Digitized by Google

SHILLING



Digitized by Google





BRITISH TROOPS of the Eastern Task Force prepare to land at Algiers. They are leaving the transport which has brought them from Britain, climbing down the scrambling nets into the landing craft below. The Eastern Task Force contained both British and American troops. On the morning of 8th November landings were made both east and west of Algiers at Ain Taya, Sidi Ferruch, and Castiglione. Converging forces rapidly surrounded

Digitized by Google



the town. By early evening an armistice was concluded, and fighting ceased. Farther west, the Central and Western Task Forces were meeting resistance.

PREPARED FOR THE WAR OFFICE BY THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

THE ARMY AT WAR: TUNISIA

CONTENTS

	Page
1. The Landings in North Africa	3
2. The First Thrust for Tunis	8
3. Hanging on to Medjez el Bab	13
4. The Nine Attacks of Von Arnim	16
5. Rommel Turns on the U.S. Second Corps	18
6. Mareth: the Eighth Army Forces the South Gate	29
7. The Battle of Wadi Akarit	34
8. The Main Offensive Opens	42
9. The Final Assault	49
10. The Collapse of the Axis Armies	56

With 12 maps, including the Battle of Mareth, p. 21, and the Final Offensive, pp. 30-31

London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1944 Price 1s 0d. net S.O. Code 70-438* Printed by The Amalgamated Press, Ltd

In "The Eighth Army" (1/-) and in "Destruction of an Army" (7d.) you may read accounts of the earlier desert fighting.

CROWN COPYRIGHT RESERVED

There are many men and women in the Forces who would welcome a chance of reading this book. If you hand it in to the nearest Post Office, it will go to them.

1. THE LANDINGS IN NORTH AFRICA

On 8th November, 1942, the British and American Armed Forces under the command of General Eisenhower landed in North-West Africa. In spite of the enormous scale of the preparations required for an operation of this magnitude, mounted so far from the scene of action, in Great Britain and America, surprise was complete. The object was to effect a landing in Morocco and Algeria; to rally the local French to the Allied cause and ultimately to occupy Tunisia so as to menace from the rear the enemy forces opposing the Eighth Army; to reopen communications through the Mediterranean, and to secure a base for subsequent operations against "the under-belly of the Axis" in southern Europe. The following narrative of this African campaign deals with the part played by the land forces; it does not cover the naval and air operations except in terms sufficient to show that they were essential to the whole.

General Eisenhower's command was divided into three task forces. The Western Task Force was directed towards Casablanca, the Centre Task Force towards Oran, and the Eastern Task Force towards Algiers. Throughout their passage the convoys enjoyed the protection of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy, which, with the Fleet Air Arm and the United States Naval Air Force, also covered the landing operations.

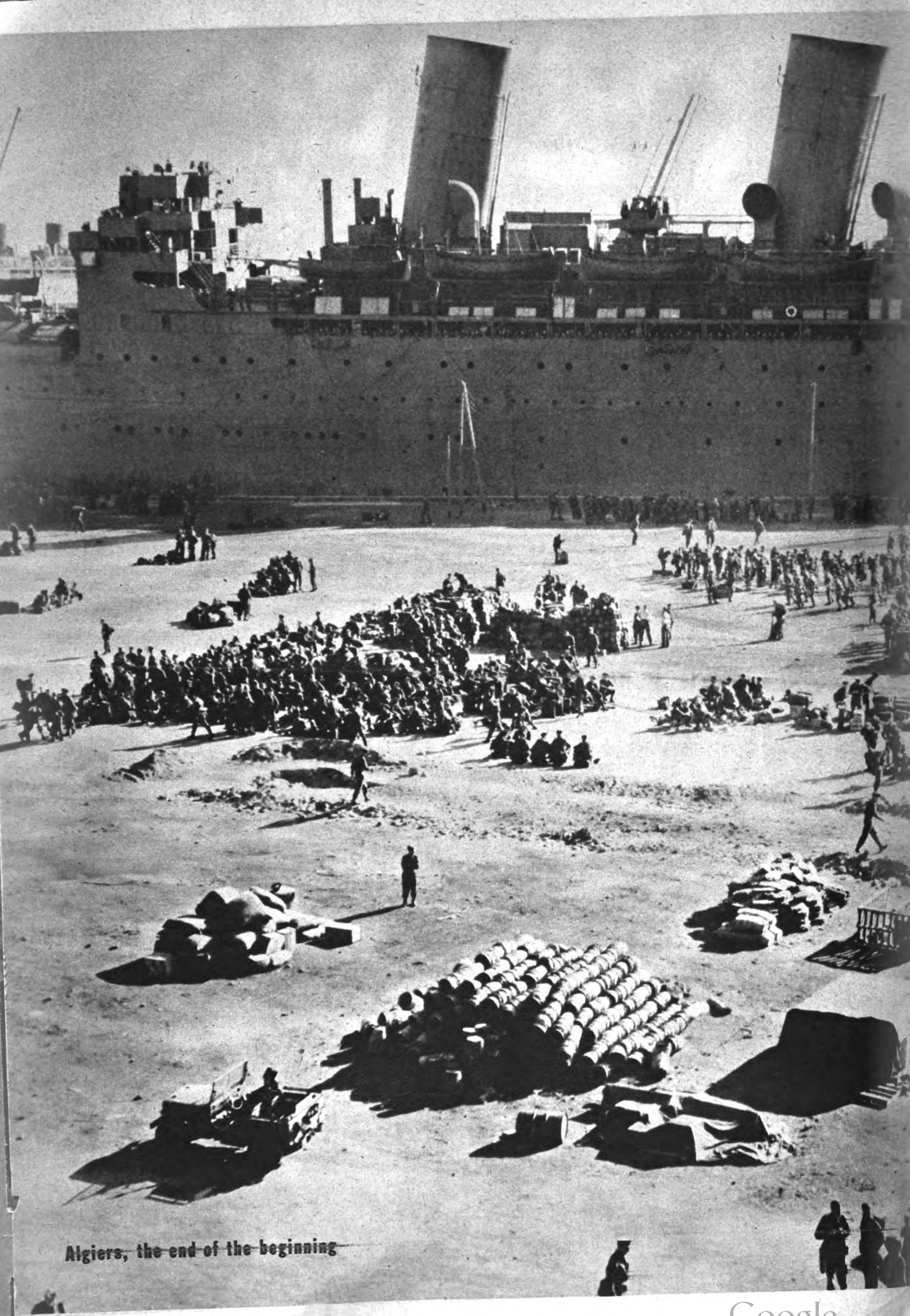
The fact that the Allied troops had to anticipate prolonged opposition from the Vichy forces played an important part in



LANDING CRAFT stream in through the dawn mist at Ain Taya, 20 miles east of Algiers. Flat sands and a calm sea provided ideal landing conditions. On the beach a group of British and American troops wait for the rest of their formation. American infantry were already in possession of the main airfield.

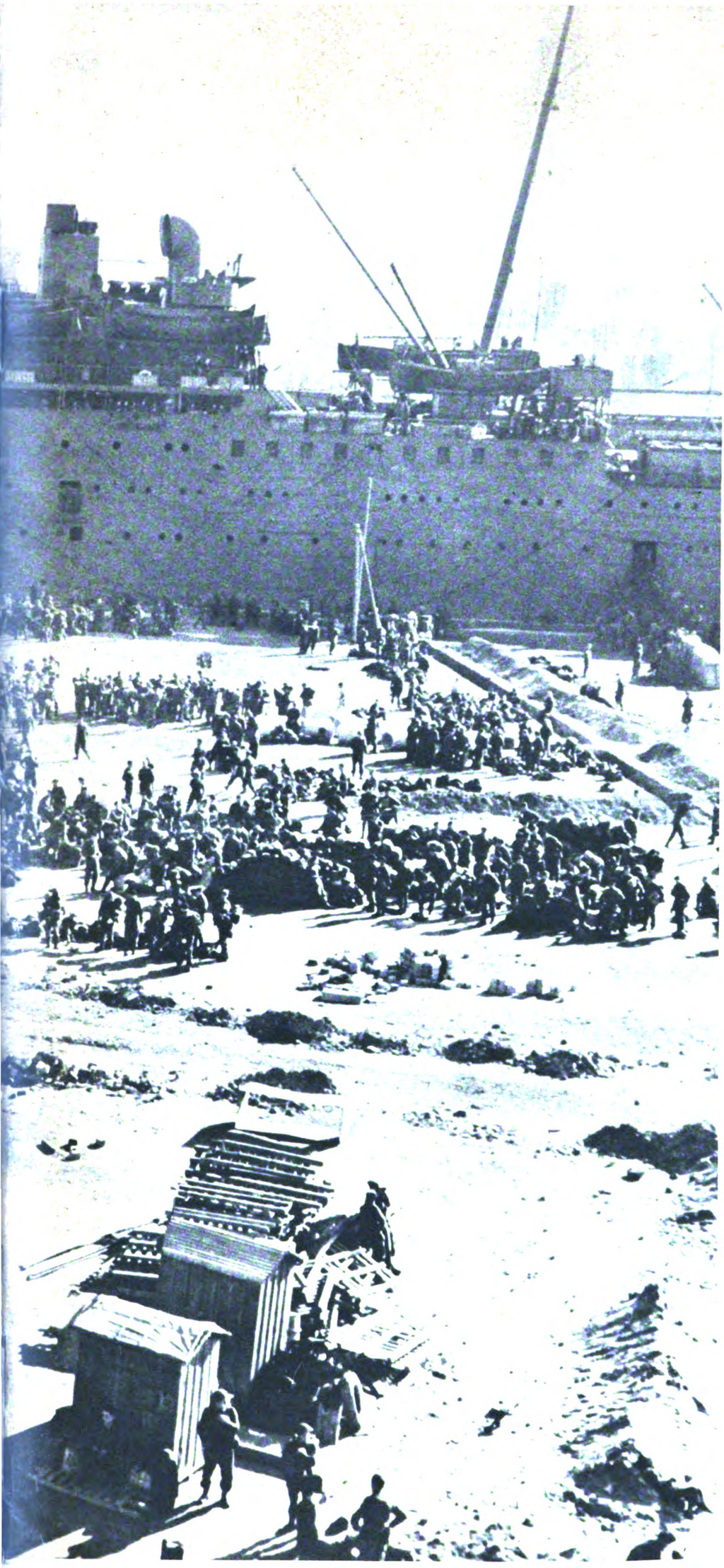
699332

Digitized by Google



Algiers, the end of the beginning

Digitized by Google



subsequent operations, for it meant that the transports had to be loaded tactically. In the case of the Western Task Force, provision was made for landing first the assault parties with a minimum of fighting vehicles, then the main body of troops, who were to secure an extended bridgehead, and last, administrative personnel and transport. In the case of the Centre and Eastern Task Forces, the assault parties were followed by their appropriate transport; then came anti-aircraft and administrative personnel and transport for the whole army; the main body of combatant troops was not scheduled to land until a later date.

The Western Task Force, which was entirely American, landed at Mehdia, Fedala, and Safi in the early morning. Resistance, at first stubborn both on the ground and in the air, was successfully overcome after three days' fighting. A sortie by Vichy warships was repulsed by the U.S. Navy, and Casablanca surrendered at 7 a.m. on 11th November.

The Centre Task Force, which was also American, landed at 1 a.m. at two points to the west and at one point to the east of Oran. The forts were bombarded by the Royal Navy, which also repulsed a sortie by Vichy warships. After the capture of the airfields, Vichy counter-attacks were repulsed, and Oran surrendered at 12.45 a.m. on 10th November.

The Eastern Task Force was composed of British and American troops. Their landings began at 1 a.m. To the east of Algiers British Commando troops and American infantry landed near Ain Taya. Advancing south-west, the Americans captured the airfield at Maison Blanche by 8.40 a.m., after overcoming slight resistance at Fort de L'Eau. The batteries on Cape Matifou were subjected to naval bombardment.

Meanwhile, a second landing was made at Sidi Ferruch by British Commando troops and American infantry and Rangers. Fort Sidi Ferruch was captured at 3 a.m. and by midday the heights to the west of the city were in Allied hands.

A third landing was made near Castiglione by British troops who advanced southwards and rapidly occupied the airfield at Blida; this had been captured by a pilot of the Fleet Air Arm who had landed and accepted the surrender. The British then moved eastwards to Bir Touta, thus cutting off the town of Algiers from communications by land.

At 7 p.m. an armistice was concluded and hostilities at Algiers ceased. Allied troops entered the town, and very soon after the capture of Maison Blanche and Blida airfields, Allied fighter aircraft arrived and started operating, giving air cover to the port. The demolition of the port installations was prevented by the landing of American troops from H.M.S. *Broke*, which had crashed through the harbour boom, and in the space of a few hours, the work of unloading Allied stores with the co-operation of French dockworkers was in progress.

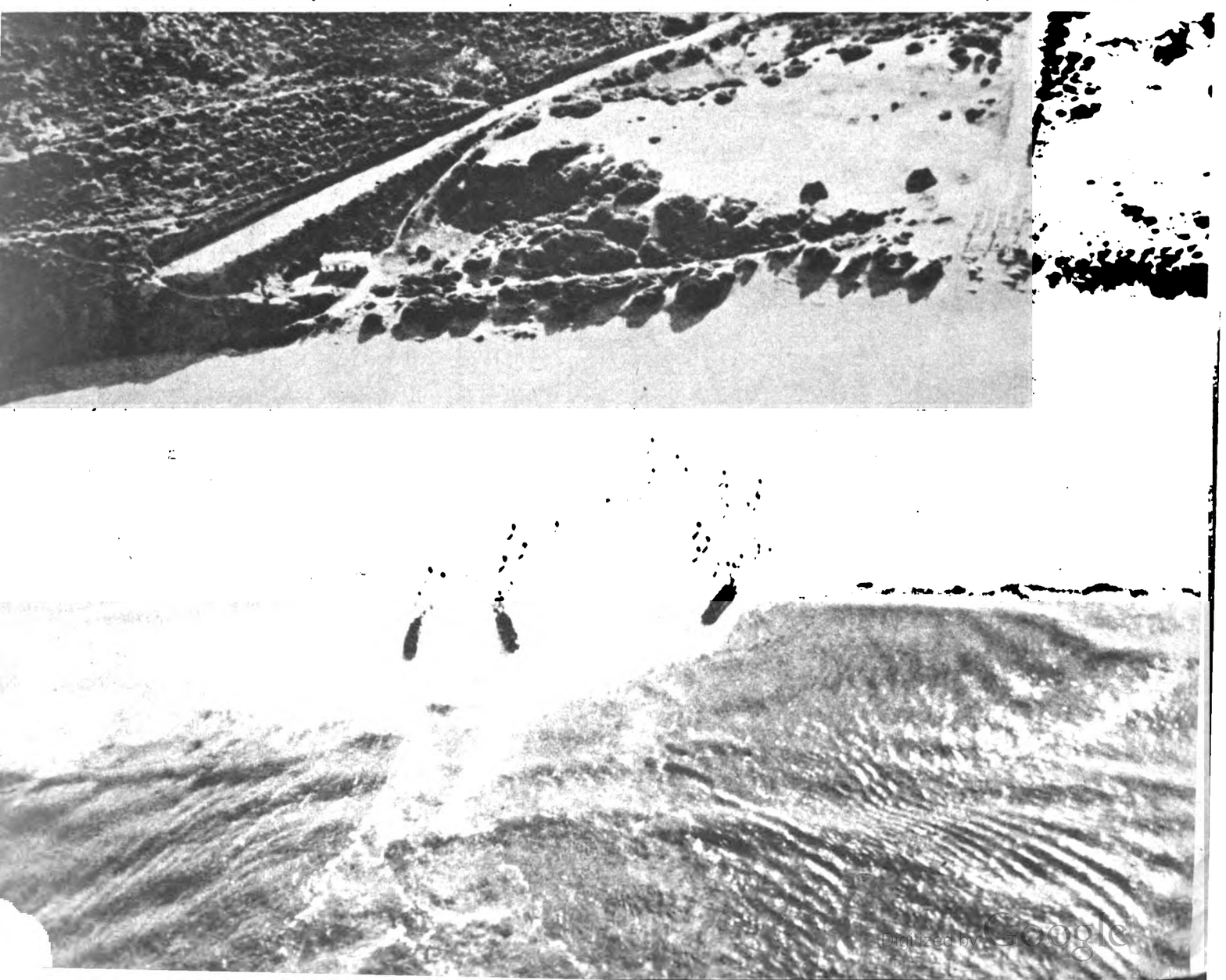
On 11th November, an order was issued by Admiral Darlan to the French troops in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to cease resistance against the Allies, and an agreement was entered into between the Admiral and General Eisenhower, the Allied C.-in-C., whereby French troops, command of whom was assumed by General Giraud, became available for operations against the Axis powers. With this step the first phase of the operations in North Africa was over: Morocco and Algeria were secured for the Allied cause; but Tunisia remained to be taken.

Digitized by Google

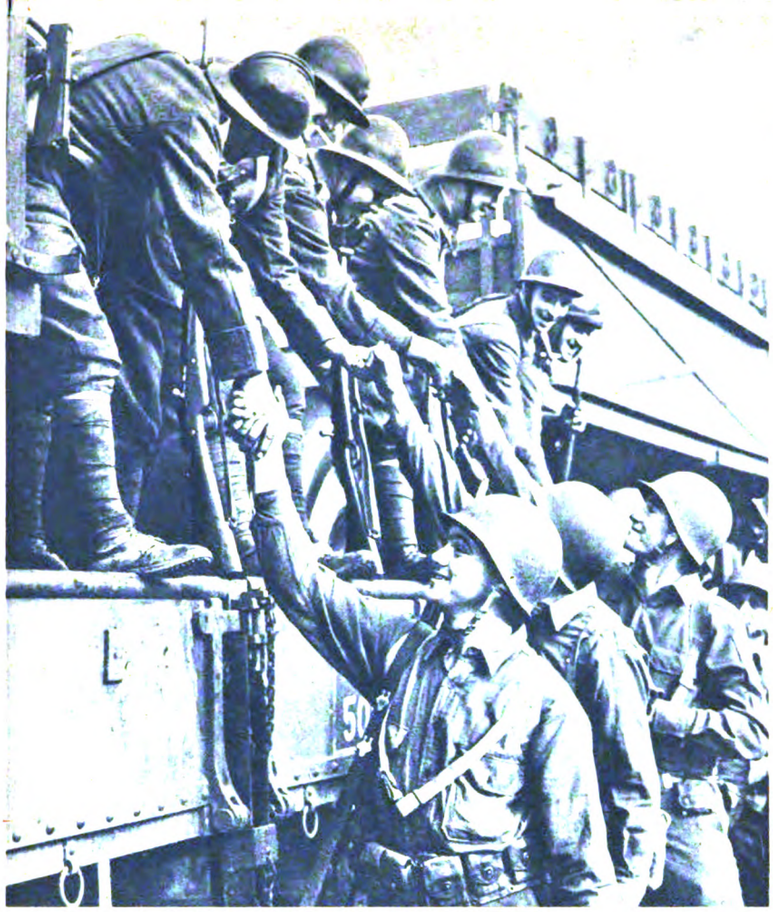


THESE AMERICAN TROOPS are on their way towards shore at Arzen. They were part of the Centre Task Force, directed on Oran, the naval base. They met resistance, and beat off counter-attacks. Oran surrendered to them forty-eight hours after the first landings. The Centre Task Force was all-American.

THEIR LANDING CRAFT BEACHED, AMERICAN INFANTRY OF THE WESTERN TASK FORCE MOVE ACROSS THE SANDS FOR THE ASSAULT ON CASABLANCA.



Digitized by Google

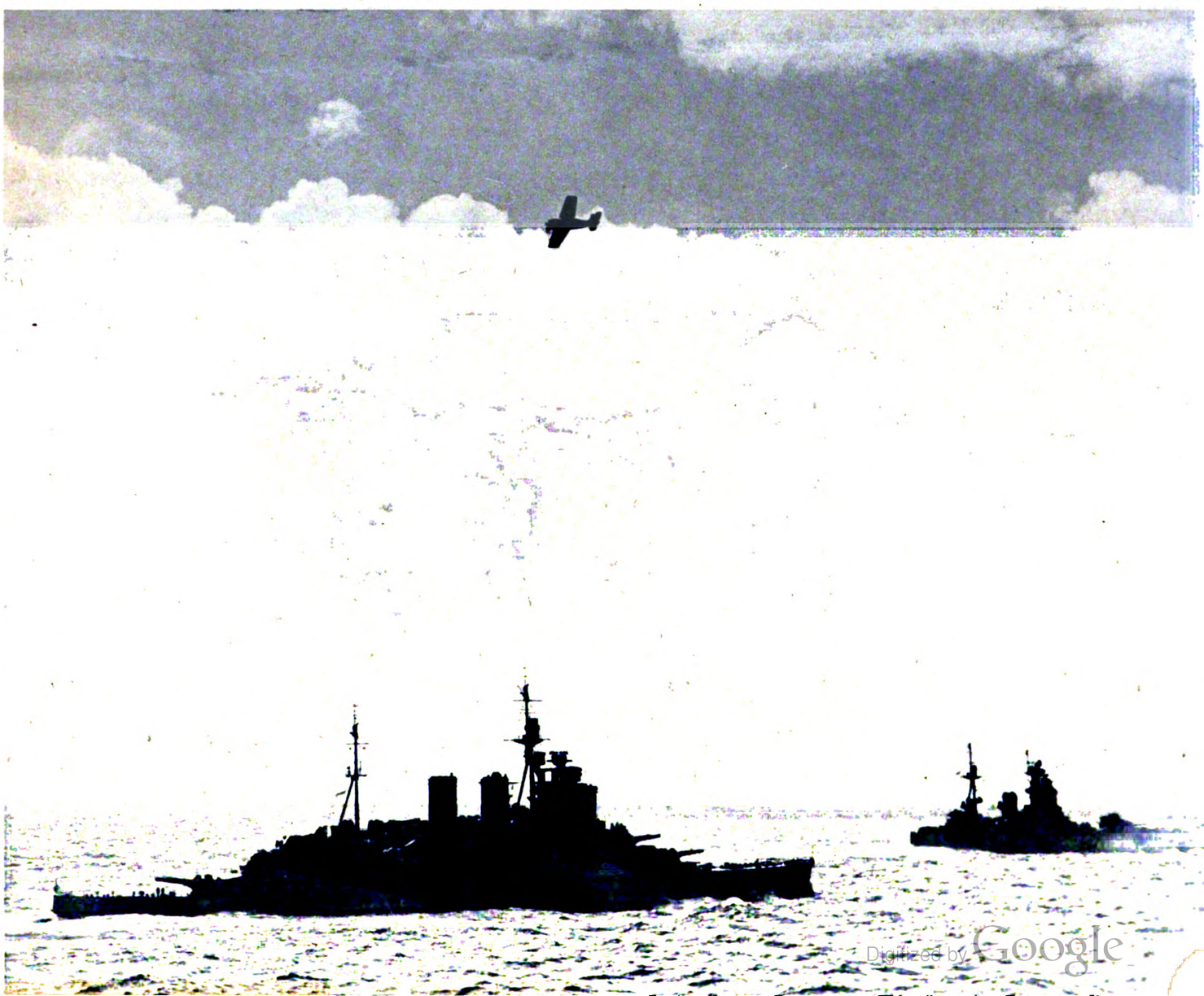


FRENCH TROOPS join the Allies and leave Oran for the front line. Americans wish them God-speed, as their train draws out for its journey to the border.



THE LANDINGS have all gone well, and the troops stream ashore. Bearing their full equipment, British parachute troops are disembarking at Algiers.

SHIPS OF THE ROYAL NAVY AND AIRCRAFT OF THE FLEET AIR ARM GUARD THE MEDITERRANEAN TASK FORCES. NO ENEMY SURFACE FORCES APPEARED.



Digitized by Google

2. THE FIRST THRUST FOR TUNIS



12 NOVEMBER—5 DECEMBER. Axis troops pour in. The First Army is halted 30 miles from Tunis.

General Anderson landed at Algiers on the evening of 9th November to take command of what was called the First Army, although then and for some time afterwards it was represented by little more than a division. Meanwhile, the enemy was flying troops to Tunis and Bizerta where the Vichy Resident General, Admiral Esteva, did nothing to prevent their arrival. General Eisenhower had then to decide General Anderson's course of action. Should he wait some weeks until the First Army was built up to full or perhaps only partial strength? Or should he advance immediately and try with the forces at his disposal, and with improvised lines of communications, to secure advanced positions near to Tunis, or even to take Tunis by a rapid stroke, before the enemy had time to transport sufficient troops to Tunisia to consolidate his position? General Eisenhower decided in favour of the second alternative. Accordingly, on 12th November, a landing of British troops was made at Bone, 300 miles farther east along the coast. Commando troops were disembarked from warships and parachute troops secured the airfield.

On 15th November, American parachute troops were dropped at Youks les Bains near Tebessa, with the airfield and petrol stores as their objective. The following day British parachute troops were dropped at Souk el Arba in order to make contact with the enemy, cover the Allied advance, and support the French units in Tunisia which had rallied to General Giraud and were hastily organising to oppose the enemy.

Meanwhile, enemy forces, which continued to arrive by air and sea, occupied Tunis, Bizerta, Sfax and Gabes. Heavy losses were inflicted on them *en route* by the Royal Navy and the Allied Air Forces, but they succeeded in increasing their strength at the rate of approximately 1,000 men a day until, towards the end of November, they numbered about 20,000 men with some armour. First came ground staff of the German Air Force with anti-aircraft and anti-tank units, followed by echelons of the German 10th Panzer and 334th Infantry Divisions and the Italian 1st (Superga) Division, building up the 5th Panzer Army under Colonel-General Jürgen von Arnim.

From Bone, British forces of the 78th Division continued their eastward advance, and on 18th November a column of the Royal West Kent Regiment with artillery in support was attacked at Djebel Abiod by a German column of 30 Mark IV tanks and 400 infantry. The attack was repulsed and heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy, who lost 11 tanks destroyed. On each of the following days attacks were made by enemy columns on the Allied forces at various points up and down the widely but very thinly held front.

By the evening of 24th November, although the organisation of lines of communication was as yet incomplete, the First Army started a general advance.

The country over which the Allied forces had to operate in entering Tunisia from Algeria is hilly and broken. Tunisia is crossed, broadly speaking, by seven parallel lines of roads and railways, running from south-west to north-east, but there are only six points of entry into Tunisia from Algeria. These routes are: (1) the coast road from Bone through Tabarka to Mateur and Bizerta; the railway accompanying this road is interrupted between La Calle and Tabarka; (2) the road and rail from Souk Aras through Souk el Arba and Beja to Mateur; (3) the road from Souk Aras through Le Kef and Medjez el Bab to Tunis; (4) the road and rail from Tebessa through Les Salines and Pont du Fahs to Tunis; (5) the road from Tebessa to Feriana, and thence the road and rail through Sbeitla and Kairouan to Sousse; (6) the road from Tebessa to Feriana and thence the road and rail to Gafsa and Sfax; (7) the track from Tozeur to Gabes, which is impassable in the rainy season.

There are, therefore, bottle-necks at Souk Aras and Tebessa. In Northern and Central Tunisia these passage-ways are separated by wooded ridges, allowing only limited intercommunication. It is country that affords good opportunities for ambush but bad going for tanks. In the south it is more open, and hills give way to marshes and depressions. In the neighbourhood of Tunis itself the country flattens out, and the approaches to the capital from the west and south are over flat plains, suitable for tanks in dry weather, and provided with numerous airfields. In wet weather, however, such as was endured for five months, the mud in Northern Tunisia was an almost insuperable obstacle to the movement of tanks off the main roads.

One British column on the left, operating from the region of Djebel Abiod, advanced on Mateur, while on the right another column of British infantry and parachutists, together with some French troops, moved on Medjez el Bab from Beja. A mixed British and American armoured force known as "Blade Force" (consisting of the 17th/21st Lancers, a Combat Command of the U.S. 1st Armoured Division, a company of the Rifle Brigade, a battery of Royal Horse Artillery, and a squadron of armoured cars of the Derbyshire Yeomanry) was directed from Souk el Arba to operate between these two columns. During all this period the British and American Air Forces were active in attacking enemy positions and protecting the disembarkation of Allied troops, stores and equipment.

On 25th November, "Blade Force" penetrated the enemy positions to a point midway between Mateur and Tebourba, and on the following day American light tanks destroyed 40 Axis aircraft on the enemy-occupied

Digitized by Google

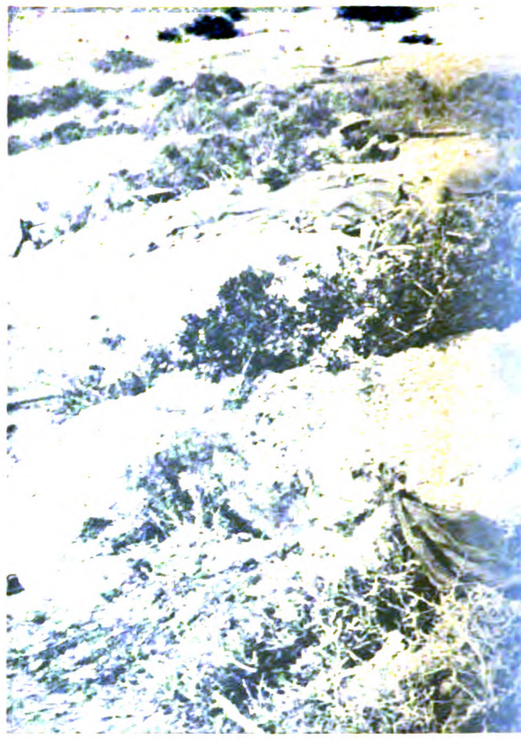


GCAN THE ROAD WINDING INTO GERMAN-HELD MATEUR. TYPICAL OF NORTH TUNISIA, THE ...Y COUNTRY IS GOOD FOR AMBUSH AND DEFENCE.

Digitized by Google



BRITISH PARACHUTE TROOPS are on patrol in the area of Beja. British and American paratroops were dropped ahead of the First Army to seize airfields, make contact with the enemy, and cover the advance.



BREN GUNNERS have dug themselves into a hillside south of Mateur. Heavy German counter-attacks

landing ground of Djedeida.

Continuing its advance down the Medjerda river, the right-hand Allied column captured Medjez el Bab in an action in which the Lancashire Fusiliers distinguished themselves. Next, Tebourba was occupied. This gave " Blade Force " freedom to operate in the region south-east of Mateur.

On 29th November pressure was maintained against the enemy north-west of Mateur and in Djedeida. Low-flying attacks by enemy aircraft were heavy, and Allied progress was further slowed down by demolitions of bridges, roads and railways.

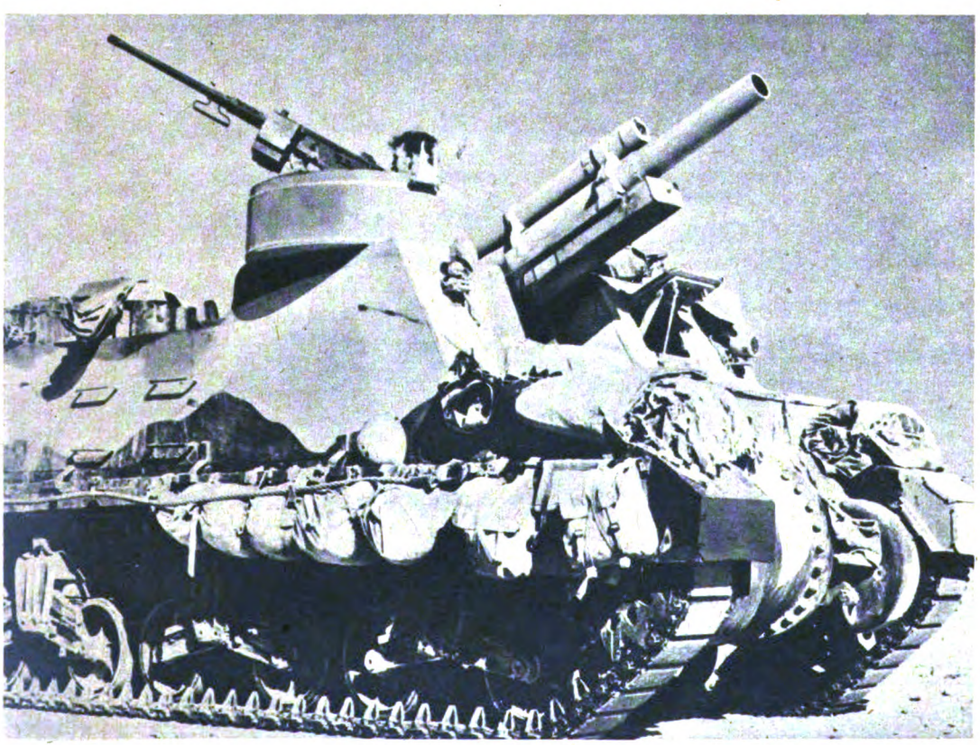
A British parachute unit was successfully dropped in the area of Pont du Fahs and patrols of the Reconnaissance Corps operated along a line from Tebourba through Massicault to Cheylus and Oudna.

On 30th November an attack was made by the left-hand British column on an enemy strong-point on a hill north of Jefna, commanding the road from Djebel Abiod to Mateur. The attack was unsuccessful and on the following day the enemy counter-attacked this column. The attack was repulsed, but in the centre the enemy struck strongly from the north with infantry, tanks and dive-bombers against the Allied positions near Tebourba. " Blade Force," which was operating between Mateur and Tebourba, became involved in confused fighting and withdrew south-west of Medjez el Bab, having suffered casualties to tanks, particularly those that had been undergoing local repairs and maintenance. A Combat Command of the U.S. 1st Armoured Division which had been in reserve in this sector went into action and by the evening had driven the enemy to the north.

Farther to the south, enemy patrols of armoured cars and light tanks pressed forward, overran Oudna, Cheylus and Depienne, and reoccupied Pont du Fahs. Still farther south, the U.S. parachute troops, who had dropped at Youks les Bains and joined with French forces in that area, patrolled actively as far south as Gafsa and as far east as Faid. They fought numerous skirmishes with enemy patrols and effectively protected the southern flank of the First Army.

On 2nd December the enemy attacked again in the Tebourba area with tanks and infantry. In the hard and indecisive fighting which followed, the enemy were estimated to have lost 14 tanks.

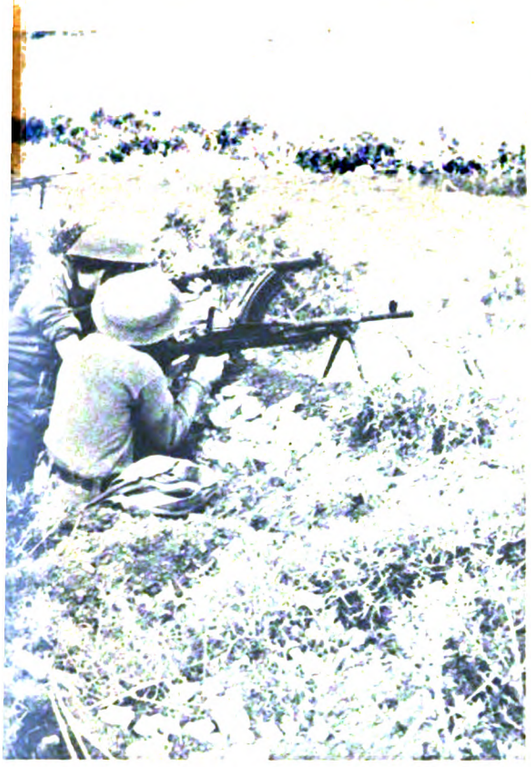
On 3rd December the enemy returned to the attack on Tebourba with at least three battalions of infantry and 35 Pz. Kw IV and Pz. Kw VI tanks, supported by heavy dive-



THE PRIEST self-propelled gun was used with great effect in North Africa. This 105 mm. high-velocity gun is mounted on a General Grant chassis. In the turret, as secondary armament, is an anti-aircraft gun.



AN AMERICAN ANTI-TANK gun is hurried towards the front along the road from Algiers. The Allied diffi-



developed as enemy reinforcements streamed in at the rate of a thousand a day, and the Allied advance was halted.



IN THE DEFENCE of Medjez el Bab these gunners are using their anti-aircraft gun for field work. They are covering a force of sappers engaged in rebuilding the bridge destroyed by the enemy who was driven east.

bombing. Under severe pressure our right hand column had to withdraw to the high ground west of Tebourba, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy but suffering considerable losses itself, particularly to the rear-guard formed by the Hampshire Regiment which, by its superb resistance, prevented the enemy from exploiting his success. This resistance was vital, for Medjez el Bab had to be held until such time as we were ready to launch the final attack on Tunis.

During the next two days, taking advantage of a relative lull, the Allied forces in the forward area re-grouped along a line covering the high ground west of Tebourba.

Meanwhile, in central Tunisia, on 3rd December, after two days' hard fighting, French units, U.S. parachute troops, and a company from the U.S. 26th Regimental Combat Team captured Faid, the important pass through the hills on the Kasserine-Sfax road.

To sum up, at this stage the enemy can be said to have reacted strongly to our first attempt to capture Tunis or Bizerta with our light advanced forces. But we had secured Medjez el Bab, the essential jumping-off ground for a final assault. The further progress of the battle was clearly destined to depend on the relative success of each side in bringing up and deploying reinforcements and supplies, and in developing and maintaining an adequate degree of air cover over the forward troops.

In this respect the Allies, compared with the Axis, started with a fourfold handicap. First, the difference in distance—100 miles to Tunis from Sicily or Sardinia as against 400 miles to Tunis from Algiers; also the rolling stock on the railways was old and insufficient; second, the fact that in Sardinia and Sicily the enemy was operating from permanent bases, whereas the Allied bases in North Africa were hurriedly improvised; third, the enemy enjoyed the use of all-weather airfields and could extemporise landing grounds by using as runways the wide main roads of the Tunisian plain; but the Allies had only one good airfield—Souk el Arba—anywhere near the front, the others being west of the Tunisian hills and too far away to afford air cover for our troops. Last, owing to the enormous length and insufficiency of land communications, and to the previously planned organisation of the convoys, it was inevitable that reinforcements for a fighting front which had developed more quickly than was originally expected, should arrive slowly and piecemeal.



culty in this first thrust was the distance (410 miles) from Algiers. The German bases were much nearer.



ELEMENTS of the U.S. 1st Armoured Division fought in the first thrust for Tunis. Here the crew of a General Lee tank are giving their gun a pull-through following the capture of the key town of Medjez el Bab.

Digitized by Google



PACK HORSES were needed to take supplies to outposts in rough country.



ACROSS rocky, pitted roads dispatch-riders bore their messages to the front.



SIGNALMEN laid and recovered cables as the units shifted their positions.



BEHIND the front line a wireless telephone network was extended to the hills.



RIVER COURSES were changed to allow for alternative traffic routes.



ENGINEERS construct a new road to run straight through to the front.

Digitized by Google



MEDJEZ EL BAB NOW BECAME THE ENEMY'S MAIN OBJECTIVE. IMPORTANT HEIGHTS TO THE NORTH WERE LOST, BUT THE TOWN WAS HELD.

3. HANGING ON TO MEDJEZ EL BAB

The next stage, with the initiative temporarily in the hands of the enemy, began on 6th December and lasted for four months. During this period the enemy made ceaseless and determined attempts to wrest our forward positions from our hands, first by attacking Medjez el Bab directly; next by pushing between the British and French sectors in the Oued Kebir and Ousseltia valleys; then (in conjunction with Rommel's operations) by striking at the American forces in a drive for Tebessa; and lastly, in a general offensive in the northern sector, particularly against Beja.

At the same time, our forces did not remain passive but undertook a number of attacks with the limited object of improving our tactical situation and testing the enemy's dispositions. This stage of the campaign, therefore, resolved itself into a series of local actions, each of minor importance in itself but any of which would have had serious consequences had it resulted in our being forced to abandon Medjez el Bab.

The enemy's offensive directed against Medjez el Bab began on 6th December and lasted until 14th December. Repeated attacks by infantry and tanks supported by air bombardment were made against British and American forces in the Medjerda valley. Weather conditions were very bad and much of the Allied Air Force was grounded on its improvised airfields owing to mud. The enemy attacks were repulsed, but a slight withdrawal from our foremost positions was ordered. This was covered by "Blade Force" and was carried out without interference though it cost the Americans heavily in tanks and transport vehicles bogged and abandoned. But it left us in possession of Medjez el Bab, though the enemy occupied the high ground to the north.

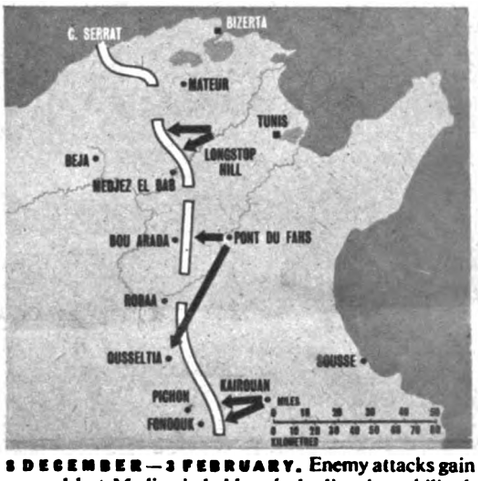
This high ground, and in particular Jebel Ahmera, "Longstop Hill", was the scene of much fierce fighting on and after 22nd December when it was captured by the Coldstream Guards. There followed successive attacks and counter-attacks by the Germans and by Allied units, including the Coldstreams and the U.S. 18th Regimental Combat Team. Twice the Allies recaptured the hill, but being exposed to heavy fire without cover, were forced to give it up. Then, on Christmas Day, the Grenadier Guards attacked and restored the position. But the mud and heavy going made any exploitation of this action impossible, and the Allied troops were withdrawn to avoid exposing them needlessly to heavy fire.

On the right of the British and American forces, French units under the command of General Koeltz, fighting with great courage in spite of poor equipment, had succeeded in consolidating a front along the line of hills (the "Eastern dorsal") on the eastern side of the Ousseltia valley. Here they successfully withstood numerous attacks, particularly in the region of Pichon and Fondouk.

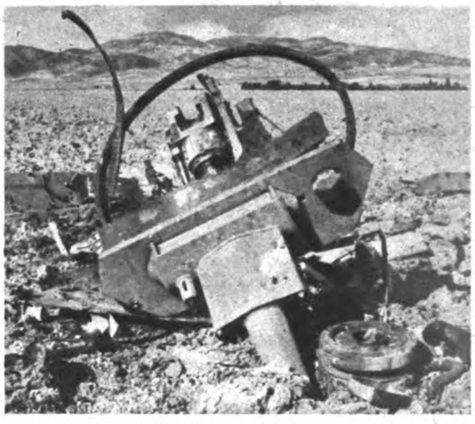
On 18th January, the enemy switched his main effort from Medjez and launched a series of attacks against the British at Bou Arada, and against the French in the Oued Kebir and Ousseltia valleys. Striking south-westwards from Pont du Fahs with infantry and tanks he succeeded in penetrating the French defences to a depth of ten miles. His intention was to drive a wedge between the British and French forces and press back the latter with the double object of threatening the right flank of the British forces and widening the coastal corridor of communication between von Arnim's and Rommel's armies. It was also important for the enemy to deprive the Allies of their observation posts on the hills overlooking the plain of Kairouan, and secure the passes through which the roads on to this plain debouched.

The French troops fought with great stubbornness but were forced to fall back, not without disorganisation and loss, while British and American forces were brought up. On January 21st, after much confused fighting, the enemy advance was stopped and our front stabilised along a line covering Robaa and running southwards to the west of Ousseltia.

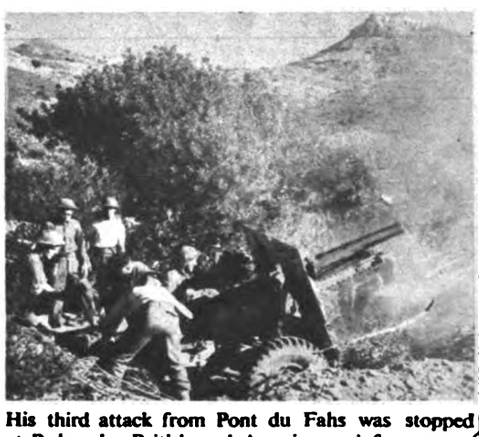
The Allied reaction to this situation took the form of an attack on 3rd February by British parachute troops, fighting as infantry, and French Legionaries, on the Jebel Mansour, a hill feature to the south of Bou Arada, commanding the Pont du Fahs–Robaa road. The attack was successful and many enemy were killed and captured. But subsequent enemy counter-attacks and infiltrations round the flanks necessitated the abandonment of the hill.



8 DECEMBER—3 FEBRUARY. Enemy attacks gain ground but Medjez is held and the line is stabilised.



When Medjez held, the enemy attacked with tanks at Bou Arada, but was beaten off with heavy losses.



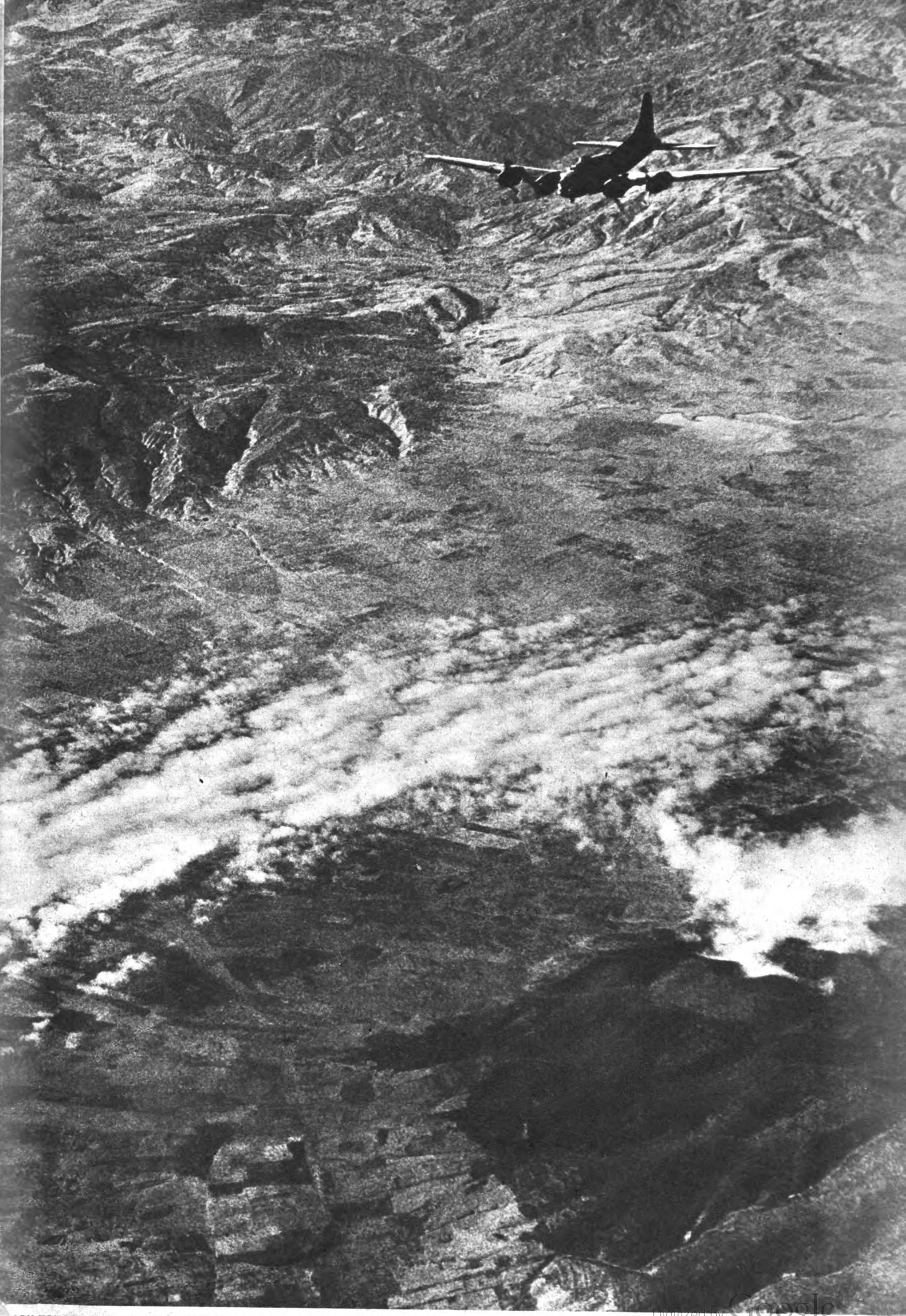
His third attack from Pont du Fahs was stopped at Robaa by British and American reinforcements.

Digitized by Google



OVER THE TUNISIAN BORDER FLY AMERICAN BOMBERS TO ATTACK AXIS AIRFIELDS AT TUNIS AND BIZERTA. THOUSANDS OF FEET BELOW ARE

Digitized by Google



ORY TOUGH RIDGES OF THE COASTAL RANGE. A CLOUD BLANKET IS FORMING. AT BOTTOM, LEFT, A RIVER WINDS TOWARDS THE MEDITERRANEAN RAN

Digitized by Google

4. THE NINE ATTACKS OF VON ARNIM

The lull which now followed in Northern Tunisian operations saw changes made that were to influence profoundly the course of the campaign.

Hitherto, Allied troops in Tunisia had had to be thrown into action as they were gradually available and as local conditions might require. Now, with the Eighth Army already across the Tripolitanian frontier, the moment had come for reorganisation. Under General Eisenhower's supreme command, the 18th Army Group was established under General Alexander as General Eisenhower's Deputy C.-in-C. The 18th Army Group, of which General Alexander assumed command on 20th February, comprised the First Army under General Anderson, the Eighth Army under General Montgomery, the American Second Corps under Major-General Fredendall, and some Saharan forces of the French Army. The bulk of the French forces, however, constituted into the 19th Corps, under General Koeltz, formed part of General Anderson's First Army. By this means the various British, American and French troops were sorted out into formations of their own nationality not smaller than divisions and assigned to separate sectors of the front. At the same time, Air Chief Marshal Tedder became Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Mediterranean, responsible to General Eisenhower and having under him Lieut.-General Spaatz, Commanding General of the North West Africa Air Force, Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, in command of the Tactical Air Force supporting the 18th Army Group, and Major-General Doolittle, commanding the Strategic Air Force.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, who, already under General Eisenhower, commanded the British and American naval forces in North-West African waters, extended his command to include all cognate operations in the Mediterranean.

The advance of the Eighth Army into south-eastern Tunisia and the prospect of the junction of Rommel's and von Arnim's armies made it more important than ever for the Axis that the corridor between them should be kept open and made secure. On 14th February, therefore, Rommel, with a force recruited from both Axis armies, launched a big attack from Faid against the Americans in central Tunisia. (A fuller account of this operation, which falls more fitly into place as part of Rommel's retreat before the Eighth Army, is given later, on p. 19.) The objective was Tebessa, and the capture of that essential supply-base, with the cutting of our communications there, might have involved the withdrawal of the First Army along the whole Tunisian front. That withdrawal was to be the signal for von Arnim, farther north, to attack with maximum strength along each of the roads running east and west through the hills. His estimation was that he could drive back our rearguards and, by seizing the bottle-necks, deprive the First Army of its jumping-off grounds for an advance against the Bizerta-Tunis plain. He grouped his forces accordingly and waited on events. But, after an initial success, Rommel failed, and Tebessa



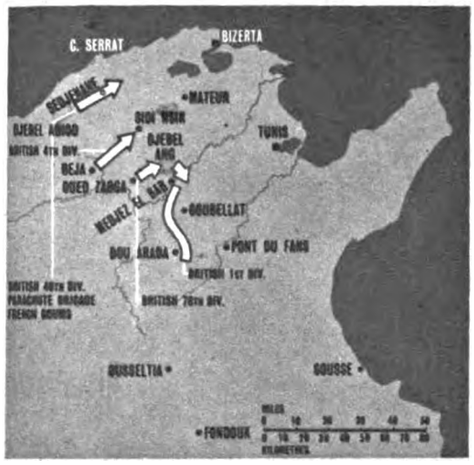
4 FEBRUARY—22 MARCH. General von Arnim attacks repeatedly and with some success in the north, but is unable to force a general withdrawal.

A FIRST ARMY PATROL probes the enemy defences towards the heights of Heidous. The mule carries a wireless set to send firing orders back to the guns.



IN BITTER FIGHTING British troops have recaptured the important high ground at Chaouach and Toukabeur. Two of them return with German rifles and helmets.





23 MARCH – 14 APRIL. Counter-attacks restore the position and clear the way for the final offensive.

was held; von Arnim had lost the advantage of attacking a retreating enemy. Nevertheless, the need to enlarge and strengthen his western perimeter remained, and he kept to his original plan of a series of simultaneous attacks on our positions. He perhaps hoped for a success in at least one or two sectors which could be exploited to the extent of effecting a deep breach in our lines and thus forcing the general withdrawal which was his real aim.

These attacks, which started on 26th February, were delivered (1) westwards along the coastal road towards Cap Serrat; (2) southwards along the track from Kef Zilia to Sedjenane; (3) westwards along the road from Mateur to Jefna and Sedjenane; (4) south-westwards along the track from Mateur towards Sidi Nsir and Beja; (5) against Medjez el Bab; (6) south-westwards from Goubellat; (7) against Bou Arada; (8) in the area of Djebel Mansour; (9) in the Ousseltia valley. The most northerly attack was made by Italian troops; all the remainder were by Germans, von Arnim putting a good half of his total strength into the field.

After two days' heavy fighting the situation was that although the enemy had penetrated the Allied positions at some points, he had then been held everywhere, had been driven out of many positions he had captured, and had suffered heavy casualties in men and material. Of the force (some 17 battalions and 50 tanks) used by the enemy, Allied forces had captured between 800 and 900 prisoners, and destroyed 12 tanks by gun-fire during these two days. The only serious penetration had been in the north, along the Mateur–Beja road. Here it was that von Arnim attempted to exploit his partial success, and with increased forces he continued his attack. It was then that at Sidi Nsir, the Hampshire Regiment and the 155th Field Battery, R.A., put up their magnificent resistance. The enemy's objective was Beja, and the troops he employed were elements of the 10th Panzer Division and Mark VI tanks of the 501st Heavy Tank Battalion. The British losses were severe, but the enemy was held and Beja saved.

Baulked of his prime objective, the enemy turned southwards against Oued Zarga, on the Beja–Medjez el Bab road, hoping to cut our communications, and at the same time increased his pressure in the north against Sedjenane. Oued Zarga was held, but Sedjenane had to be given up, and after a prolonged struggle the enemy captured Jebel Dahra, near Jebel Abiod, on 21st March, thereby threatening Beja from the north. This was, however, the limit of the enemy advance, and it was not such as to enforce any general withdrawal by us.

On 22nd March the position was that although the key positions of Beja, Medjez el Bab and Bou Arada remained firmly in British hands, the enemy had pressed uncomfortably close, especially to the Beja–Medjez el Bab road. In view of the fact that the final attack on Tunis would have to be mounted and launched from the area of Medjez el Bab, it was essential that the enemy be driven out of the commanding positions he had acquired north and north-west of the town.

On 28th March the British 46th Division and a Parachute Brigade, with the support of French Goums, launched an attack from Jebel Abiod in the direction of Sedjenane, which was recaptured by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on 30th March. The 4th Division cleared the Beja–Mateur road almost to Sidi Nsir. Then, on 7th April, the 78th Division started its drive against the enemy in the heights north of Oued Zarga and cleared them to a depth of some five miles north of the Beja–Medjez el Bab road. On 14th April Jebel Ang, north of Medjez el Bab, was captured, and the stage was nearly ready for the final offensive.

It is now necessary, however, to go back in time to January, 1943, and southwards in space to the frontier between Tunisia and Tripolitania.

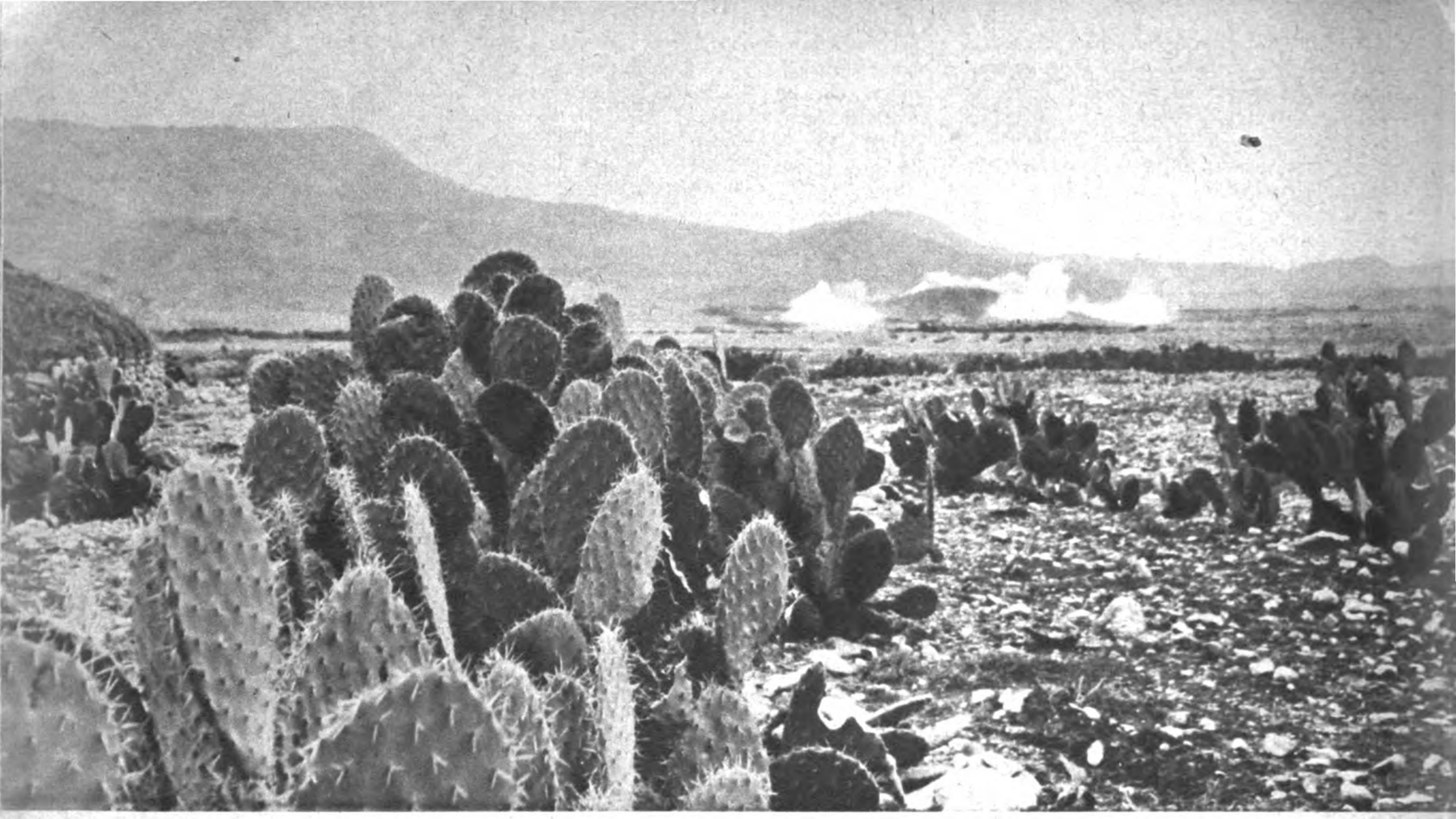
MINE DETECTORS are used by sappers to clear the roadside between Medjez and Oued Zarga. The heights retaken after the "nine attacks" dominated this road.



WOUNDED MEN lie in a monastery converted into a casualty clearing statio These clearing stations are the most advanced fully equipped medical post



Digitized by Google



THE THUNDER OF ENEMY ARTILLERY FILLS THE KASSERINE PASS AS ROMMEL FALLS BACK FROM HIS THRUST TOWARDS THE ALLIED BASE OF TEBESSA.

5. ROMMEL TURNS ON THE U.S. SECOND CORPS

The fall of Tripoli marked the end of the long drawn out desert campaign. With its fine harbour in our hands, however, it was again possible for the Eighth Army to operate at full strength, and to carry westward its campaigning within the general tactical plan of the Allied forces in the north.

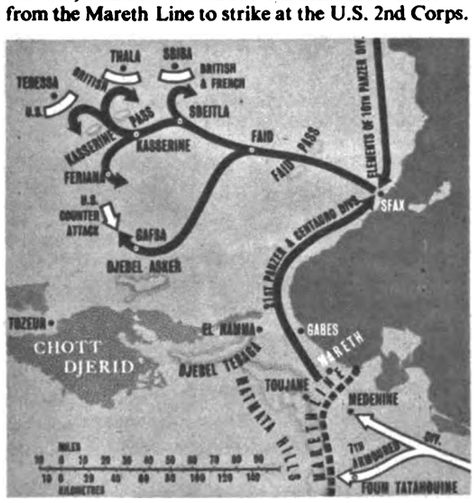
Axis strategy was now based on the fusing of Rommel's and von Arnim's forces to maintain their hold on Tunisia, thereby denying us the free passage of the Central Mediterranean and deferring any attack on the European " under-belly." Henceforward the Eighth Army was destined to be the southern prong of the pincers which should close on this last Axis stronghold in North Africa.

Tripoli was entered on 23rd January. The harbour was found to have suffered severely from Allied air attack and from enemy demolitions. The entrance was blocked with eight sunken ships and the quays were holed and cratered.

Benghazi, our nearest port, was now far in the rear, and its capacities were strictly limited. Before the Eighth Army could advance farther, supplies had to be built up, and the need for this enforced a temporary lull in offensive operations. All the formations which had taken part in the campaign, with the exception of the 7th Armoured Division, which maintained contact with the enemy's rearguards, were halted in the area of Tripoli.

Rommel hurried back the bulk of his Italian forces towards the prepared position in the Mareth area, which they reached on 29th January, behind a rearguard screen of German troops who fought most determined delaying actions along the coastal road. Frequent minefields and the sodden ground off the road, which itself was badly cratered, slowed down the advance of the 7th Armoured Division to Pisidia on the Tunisian frontier. Here the coastal road was so thoroughly destroyed that a southward detour had to be made. The salt pans of Sebkret et Tadet, held by enemy detachments supported by tanks and artillery, further delayed the advance of our land forces, and bad weather curtailed our air activity. On 8th February, however, the 7th Armoured Division secured a bridgehead over the marshes at Oglat el Haj Sayid; the enemy then withdrew and on 15th February we were within five miles of Ben Gardane;

29 JANUARY—25 FEBRUARY. Threatened from the rear, Rommel withdraws his armoured divisions from the Mareth Line to strike at the U.S. 2nd Corps.



two days later the 12th Lancers reached Medenine and our patrols had occupied Foum Tatahouine. Our advanced forces were now up against the Mareth Line, but a pause was inevitable. Our main forces had still to be moved up, supplies concentrated and the enemy positions reconnoitred before an attack could be launched.

This pause was used by Rommel to strengthen his position in the Mareth area, where his troops were busily digging themselves in, hoping to block the Eighth Army's advance. But the work on Tripoli harbour and the forwarding of supplies went far more quickly than the Germans could have expected, and the Eighth Army was ready before Rommel. The ensuing victory at Mareth was won on the Tripoli docks as well as on the battlefield.

The Mareth defences were being held by the XXth and XXIst Italian Corps, the German 90th Light Division and the 15th Panzer Division; the enemy's advance patrols were well forward towards the outskirts of Medenine. On his right flank the chain of the Matmata hills as far south as the Foum Tatahouine pass was held by the Italian Sahara Group and the German 164th Light Division with a Reconnaissance Unit. To safeguard his flank and rear, a small force, consisting of the Brigade Nicolai and one Panzer Grenadier Regiment, was based on El Hamma to cover the Jebel Matmata–Jebel Melab–Jebel Tebaga gap against the possible activities of the Fighting French forces under General Leclerc.

Rommel was confident that the Mareth position could be held successfully. The danger that he foresaw was not so much

Digitized by Google

that of frontal attack, for which his forces were amply sufficient, nor of a large-scale outflanking movement, which he more or less ruled out on account of the difficulties of the terrain west of the Matmata range. It was that of being cut off from von Arnim's forces in north-eastern Tunisia by an eastward push of the American forces from the hills into the Sfax plain across the Axis lines of communication. While, therefore, our advance from Tripoli was making steady but slow progress, Rommel had dispatched northwards the greater part of his armour (the 21st Panzer Division and the Centauro Division, reinforced by elements of the 10th Panzer Division from von Arnim's Army), and on 14th February he launched a heavy attack, effectively supported by dive-bombers, on the positions near Sidi Bouzid held by the U.S. Second Corps under Lieut.-General Fredendall. After severe fighting, with attacks and counter-attacks, the U.S. 1st Armoured Division suffered severe losses and was forced to retire, abandoning Sidi Bouzid. On the same day, the enemy occupied Gafsa without resistance. An American counter-attack on 16th February threw the Axis forces back some six miles, but on the next day the enemy renewed the offensive, and, after severe fighting, fought his way into the outskirts of Sbeitla, the American forces having again to withdraw with the loss of much of their transport. In consequence, Sbeitla, Kasserine and Feriana (including three valuable airfields) had to be evacuated, and to conform to the new situation American and French forces farther north were also compelled to fall back

There was sharp fighting at other points on the line, and at Sbiba on 19th February two enemy attacks were repulsed, with the loss of six tanks, by a mixed force including a Guards Brigade, a British tank Brigade equipped with Churchill tanks, and French troops; but on the following day the enemy, after an initial failure, secured the Kasserine Pass. He was now almost within reach of his real objective, Tebessa, and on 21st February he made a two-pronged attack northwestwards and northwards from the Kasserine Pass. The first of these two thrusts was repulsed with the loss of ten tanks by the Americans. In the Thala area a small British force (including the Lothian and Border Horse and the 17th/21st Lancers), switched south from the First Army, with the artillery of the U.S. 9th Division, reinforced the American units and together they at last forced the enemy back, destroying eight tanks.

On 23rd February, the enemy began to withdraw, suffering heavy casualties, but laying extensive minefields as he went, and two days later the Kasserine Pass was again in Allied hands. Rommel had shot his bolt. He had failed in his main object, the capture of Tebessa, which would have forced a withdrawal along the whole Allied front in Central Tunisia. He had, however, inflicted on the U.S. 1st Armoured Division such losses as might be expected to immobilise it for some time to come. Thus he assured his line of retreat from Mareth. In any case, since our preparations at Mareth were now well advanced, he could no longer afford any such dispersal of his forces as a renewal of the Tebessa adventure would have involved.

AN AMERICAN DRIVER of a Sherman tank waits for the signal to attack at the Kasserine Pass, where Rommel has stationed a rearguard to cover his retreat.



BRITISH GRENADIERS cut across mountainous country towards Kasserine. Their Bren carriers are part of the force that stopped the final attack at Thala.



AMERICAN INFANTRY converging on a destroyed German tank after the advance to Kasserine. Rommel had been blocked by the Americans at Tebessa.



BESIDE THE TURRET of his Mark III tank, one of the German crew lies dead. The German armoured divisions suffered heavy losses during the withdrawal.



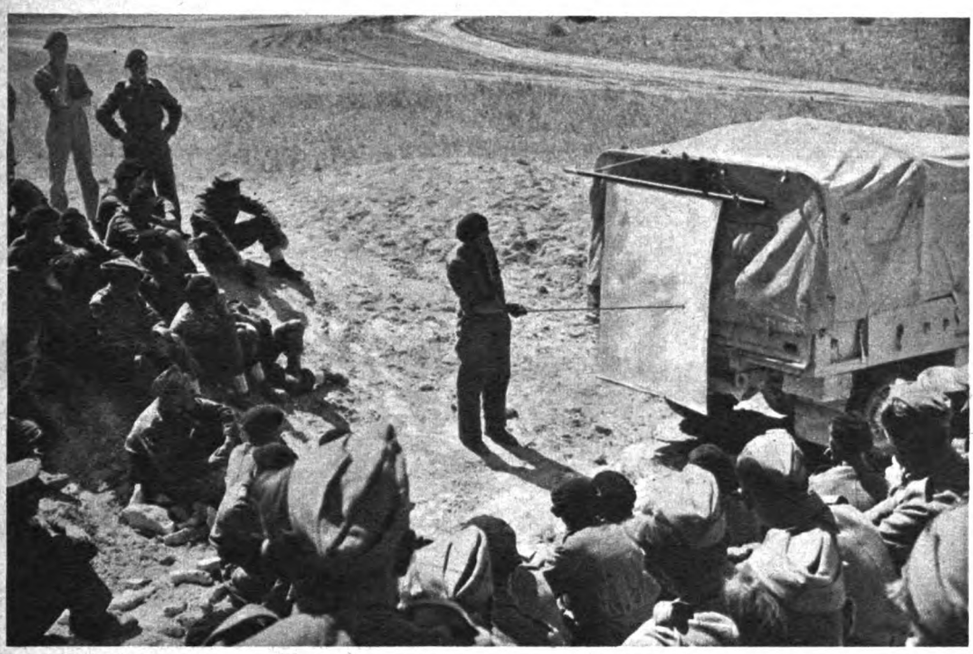
Digitized by Google

6. MARETH

THE EIGHTH ARMY FORCES THE SOUTH GATE



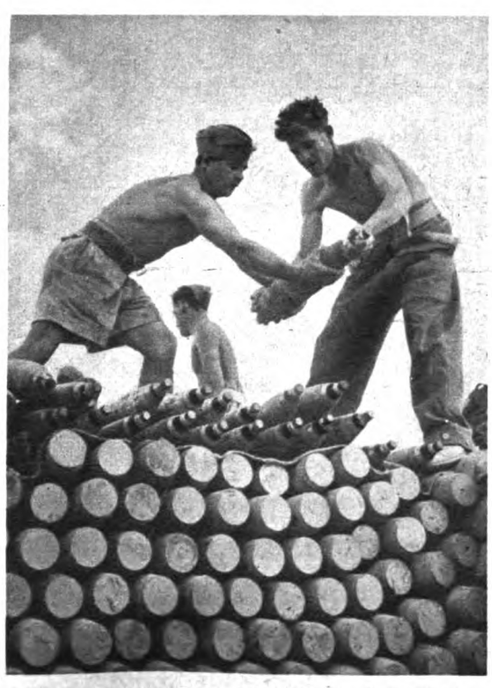
BALTIMORE BOMBERS TAKE OFF to attack the Mareth Line. The jeep on the right is part of a mobile Flying Control unit. The Allied Air Forces created new standards in co-operation, bringing advanced airfields into use so rapidly that air cover never failed. This airfield was created in one night by mechanical levellers.



THE PLAN OF BATTLE at Mareth is explained to a group of men who will soon be fighting it. The map covers about the same area as that on the page opposite. The tip of the officer's pointer rests on El Hamma.



BEFORE THE OFFENSIVE, a linesman, ankle-deep in the marshes, checks and repairs telephone wires.



GUN POSITIONS receive a supply of ammunition. As the attack drew near, shelling became intense.

At this point Rommel decided on a bold stroke against the Eighth Army. He left the Centauro Division in the Gafsa area, but recalled the 21st Panzer Division and part of the 10th Panzer Division to Mareth, the latter moving to his right flank in the neighbourhood of the Ksar Halluf Pass, while the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions took up their stations at the western end of the main defences. Opposing them were the 51st Division with an Armoured Brigade in the coastal sector, the 7th Armoured Division astride the Mareth–Medenine road, the 2nd New Zealand Division with a Light Armoured Brigade and a Guards Brigade at Medenine, and patrols of the Staffordshire Yeomanry flanking the foothills.

On the evening of 4th March a diversionary attack was launched by Italian infantry of the "Young Fascists" Division and some tanks against the New Zealanders on the Wadi Zeuss; it was not pushed home. At dawn on 6th March the real attack was delivered against the 2nd New Zealand Division and the Guards on our left flank. First, with artillery and air-bombing support, the detached battle group of the 10th Panzer Division advanced from Halluf and Toujane. Later, the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and the 90th Light Division attacked between the Gabes road and the foothills. Both attacks failed. In the afternoon four more attacks were attempted, all without success. The enemy lost 52 tanks and suffered heavy casualties in personnel. Our own casualties were extremely light, and our armour never even came into action; the enemy tanks were engaged by our anti-tank guns at point-blank range and were hopelessly defeated; one battalion of the Scots Guards alone accounted for 15 of them. The enemy fell back, hammered by our air attack; the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions were sent to Central Tunisia; and the Axis tactics at Mareth reverted to those of passive defence.

Rommel, with characteristic boldness and obstinacy, had tried to repeat once more the tactics successfully used in France in 1940. They were first employed by him in Africa against General Auchinleck on 25th November, 1941. He used them again on 27th May, at Gazala, and attempted them once more, with results disastrous for himself, at El Alamein on 30th August. These tactics consisted of using his armour as the spearhead of an attack directed against or round the enemy's flank, the idea being to get behind his prepared lines of defence and, having smashed his tanks, to deal at leisure with his infantry. They further involved the risk of sending tanks forward without pre-

Digitized by Google



THE BATTLE OF MARETH. Here Messe stood on a strong position to defend the south gate of Tunisia. The coastal approach is bottle-necked by the lie of the Matmata Hills and the Chott Jerid branching east towards the sea. The armies (only the formations actively engaged are shown) faced each other across the Wadi Zigzaou on the Mareth Line. General Montgomery's plan had two main elements—a frontal attack by the 50th and 51st Divisions near the coast, and an outflanking movement behind the Matmata Hills across desert tracks to the El Hamma gap, 45 miles behind the Mareth Line. The frontal attack was blocked after a short advance. General Montgomery then swung his weight into the outflanking movement (the "left hook"), sending British armour after the New Zealanders. This move was a brilliant success. Taken in the rear, Messe raced back from Mareth and stood again at Wadi Akarit, but was dislodged after sharp fighting. He then withdrew his forces which were blocking the U.S. 2nd Corps to the west, and British and American patrols met on the road to Gafsa.

Digitized by Google



26 FEBRUARY—29 MARCH. New Zealanders, supported by British armour outflank the Mareth Line as U.S. forces move south and east from Gafsa.

liminary clearing action by infantry, and without much infantry support, against defences whose location and strength had not been ascertained by previous reconnaissance. At Mareth again he paid a heavy price for his rash obstinacy. At the same time, an attack on the French patrols at Ksar Rhilane cost him 18 armoured cars and seven guns destroyed by air bombing, and our patrols were gradually mastering the south end of the Matmata range of hills. This was Rommel's last exploit; he left, a sick man, for Europe, and General Messe took over the Axis forces in the south, now constituted as the 1st Italian Army.

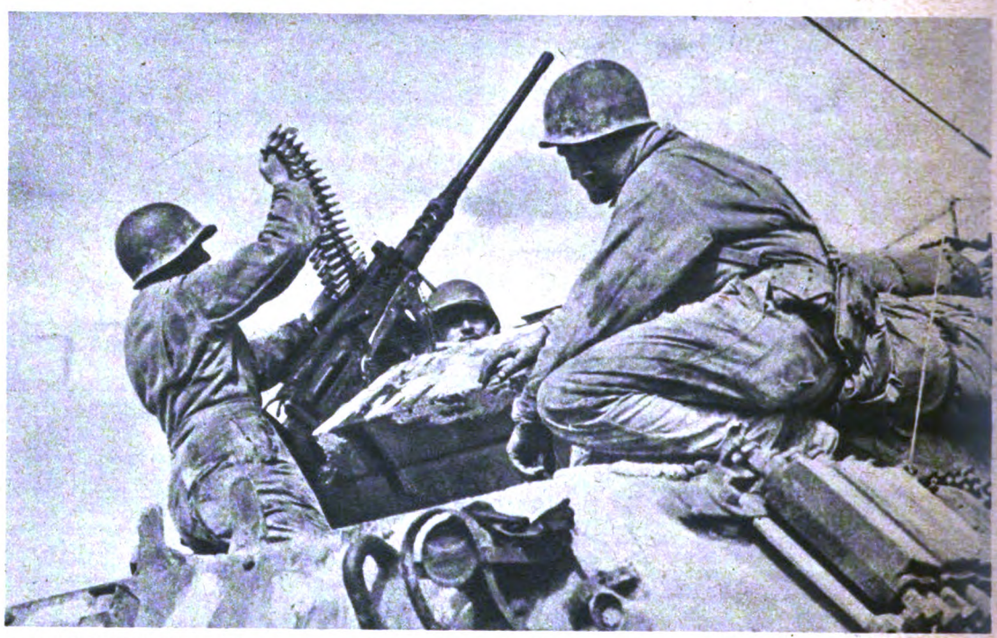
Our forces in front of Mareth were now strengthened by the 50th Division and the 4th Indian Infantry Division, with others also moving up; and on 15th March our front at the north end of the line was advanced slightly to improve our position. Meanwhile the U.S. Second Corps in Central Tunisia, now under Lieut.-General G. S. Patton, forged southwards and eastwards in an extensive advance. They occupied Gafsa; and, splitting there, the U.S. 1st Armoured Division (which had been so rapidly re-equipped that it was again fit for action) advanced along the Maknassy road towards Zannuch, while the U.S. 1st Infantry Division secured the west end of the Bou Hamrah ridge and pushed on towards El Guettar. The 21st Panzer Division, with some Italian infantry, fell back on Sened, while the Gafsa force, consisting of elements of the Centauro (Armoured) Division and two German Reconnaissance Units and other Italian infantry, retired to hold positions on Jebel Chemai and Jebel Berda, on either side of the southern road to Gafsa.

On the night of 16th March, a Brigade of Guards attacked on the upper course of the Wadi Zeuss and at the cost of heavy casualties captured the German stronghold of Horseshoe Hill. All efforts to bring up support failed and a partial withdrawal ensued. This seeming failure did, however, contribute much to the success of our final attack. The enemy were now wholly misled as to the direction from which this would come, and their deception was increased when on the following day the Allied Air Force started a violent offensive against the enemy's lines.

But a frontal attack was only one part of General Montgomery's scheme. On 21st March the 2nd New Zealand Division, with a British Armoured Brigade's supporting troops, made a detour round the Matmata range, advanced north to Jebel Tebaga and thence north-east in the direction of El Hamma, while the landing-grounds there and the enemy's positions on Jebel Tebaga



ARMOURED CARS OF THE U.S. 1ST DIVISION DEPLOY BELOW THE BOU HAMRAH RIDGE, THEIR



A TANK MACHINE-GUNNER rearms during a lull in the fighting to the west of El Guettar.

AMERICAN PATROLS ADVANCING WITH THE U.S. 1ST ARMOURED DIVISION ENTER THE RAILWAY



Digitized by Google



GUNS READY TO MEET AIR ATTACK. BEYOND GAFSA ENEMY ARMOUR BLOCKED THEIR ADVANCE.



FORWARD OBSERVERS, keeping their radio sets beside them, have a meal at their post.

VILLAGE OF MAKNASSY. ELEMENTS OF THE 21ST PANZER DIVISION WERE WITHDRAWING TO THE EAST.



were heavily bombed by the Air Force. The bombing of the Mareth lines continued.

In the north the U.S. 1st Infantry Division was held up on the Jebel Rouana by the 9th, 10th and 12th Bersaglieri Regiments, but the U.S. 1st Armoured Division pushed on to within three miles of Maknassy station, taking more than 1,000 prisoners. On the 22nd, they occupied Maknassy and advanced five miles beyond it. The U.S. 1st Infantry Division, now reinforced by the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, was attacking the Jebel el Berda positions all day, but could not advance. Farther south, the French Saharan forces pushed east to Jebel Askar. The purpose of this limited advance by the U.S. Second Corps was to establish at Gafsa a supply dump for the Eighth Army, and to draw off German reserves from the Mareth front.

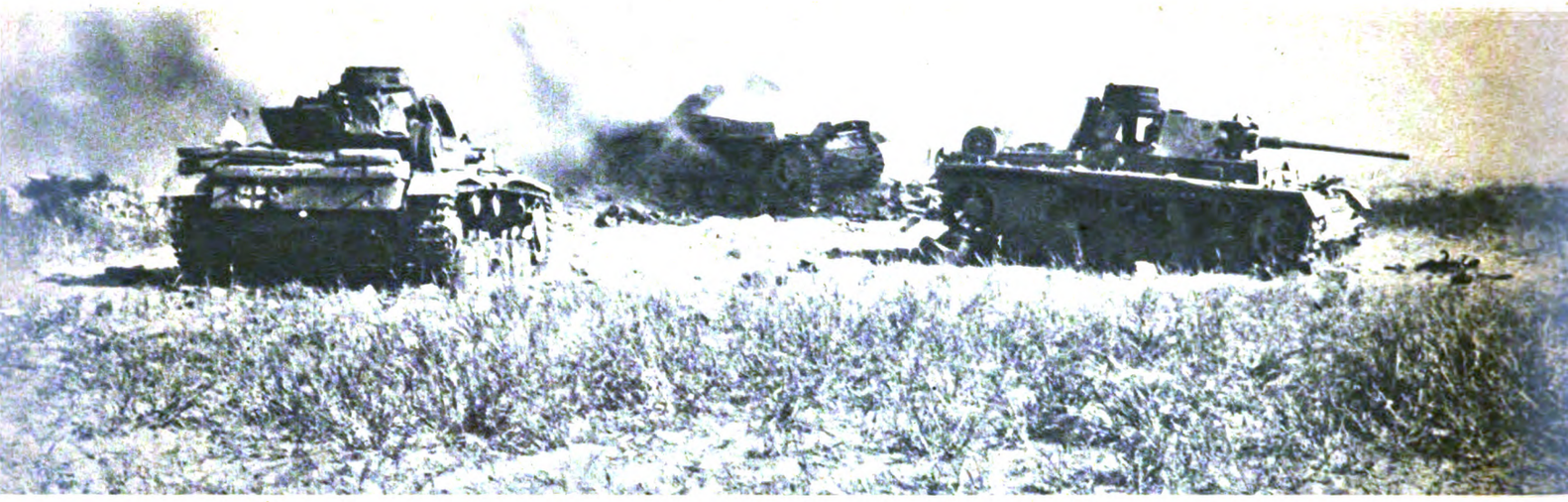
During the night of 21st March the main British attacks were launched. The New Zealanders were up against a prepared position consisting of an ancient Roman frontier wall spanning the gap between Jebel Tebaga and Jebel Melab. This, held by infantry of the Italian Sahara Group and of the Pistoia Division, was strengthened by anti-tank ditches and minefields, while the enemy tanks were kept hull-down in steep-sided wadis in the rear of the position. After heavy fighting, a breach was effected and a bridgehead secured; 700 prisoners were taken, and by midday the New Zealanders' left flank was only ten miles south-west of El Hamma; but El Hamma itself and positions in the Tebaga range were still firmly held, and the enemy tanks were still able to offer strong opposition.

On the Mareth line, the Eighth Army's attack was delivered against the coastal sector. After half an hour's artillery barrage, the 50th Division, which had moved up through the marshland east of the Wadi Zigzaou, crossed the wadi (which was water-logged after a rain-storm) and came up against an anti-tank ditch 24 feet deep and commanded by heavy machine-gun fire from strong points on its western lip. By means of scaling poles and planks our men climbed the trench side and rushed the nearer defences. These consisted of trenches, pill-boxes and machine-gun posts. Of the concrete-built strongpoints (Zarat, Ouersi, Ksiba West and Ksiba East) two were taken by bayonet attacks, and a bridgehead was established, though Ksiba East, close to the coast, held out till nightfall and commanded our position. The "Young Fascists" holding the line had been strongly reinforced by German Grenadiers of the 15th Panzer Division, who counter-attacked violently, but the 50th Division, supported by the 50th Royal Tank Regiment, held on throughout the day while the Royal Engineers tried to bridge the wadi and the anti-tank ditch.

During the night of 22nd March the 51st Division advanced through the minefields but was held by heavy and accurate fire at the anti-tank trench, which by this time had been bridged by Indian Sappers and Miners; it was impossible to get support weapons up to the front, where enemy tanks attacked again and again. Little by little our bridgehead position was penetrated, and by first light on 23rd March most of the troops holding out had to be withdrawn and only an area round Ksiba West remained in our hands. Fighting continued throughout the day, and both the 50th and 51st Divisions were heavily shelled and counter-attacked, but they maintained their ground.

In the Gafsa sector the U.S. 1st Infantry

Digitized by Google



HEAVY LOSSES WERE INFLICTED ON ROMMEL when he sent his tanks forward in a big attack designed to forestall the British offensive at Mareth. These burning Mark IIIs were stopped in their tracks by anti-tank gunners. Rommel lost over 50 tanks. It was his last engagement in Africa.



A MEDIUM BATTERY opens fire to soften the Mareth defences as the British night attack opens.

Division was attacked by some 50 tanks of the 10th Panzer Division and two battalions of German infantry. Some gun positions were overrun and 20 guns lost, but eventually the attack was repulsed with a loss to the Germans of 20 tanks, and a second counter-attack by them failed completely. In the Maknassy area the U.S. 1st Armoured Division was engaged throughout the day, and took 100 prisoners.

On the following day, in further fighting, the U.S. 1st Armoured Division advanced slightly, destroying four German tanks. Meanwhile the Americans at Maknassy were holding up a German heavy (Mark VI) tank battalion, two reconnaissance units, the 29th "Marsch" Infantry Regiment, two other German battalions, the Italian 31st Tank Regiment and three infantry battalions. On the El Guettar front the enemy had part of the 10th Panzer Division, the Centauro Division and two infantry battalions.

During the night of 23rd March the 50th Division withdrew east of the Wadi Zigzaou, and the 4th Indian Division began penetrating the Matmata Hills; by the evening of the 25th they had occupied Halluf. On the main Mareth front ground action was limited, but the Air Force was particularly active and raided enemy positions with great effect. In the El Hamma area "tank-busters" scored a notable success, destroying 23 enemy tanks; here, on the 24th and 25th, there was only patrol activity, but on the next day a new phase of the battle opened suddenly. The enemy had originally believed that the character of the desert behind the Matmata hills would limit anything that we might attempt there to a mere diversion; the appearance of the 2nd New Zealand Division had upset his calculations and forced him to switch against them forces which he could ill spare from the Mareth Line. Now General Montgomery sent up the 1st Ar-

TRANSPORT OF THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION FORCES ITS WAY THROUGH THE DEEP SAND WASTES BEHIND THE MATMATA RANGE TO TAKE THE MARET



Digitized by Google



BRITISH GUNS SHELL THE AXIS FORWARD DEFENCES at Mareth as the frontal attack, following the heavy night barrage, is pressed forward towards the Wadi Zigzaou. The country is softer than the desert, with tussocky grass and palm trees. In bitter fighting a small bridgehead was made across the Wadi.

moured Division to reinforce the New Zealanders; the main battle was to be fought in the entrance to El Hamma plain. In the afternoon of 26th March, the New Zealanders, having secured an important position on the high ground of Jebel Melab, launched an attack along the El Hamma road and gained all their objectives. The 1st Armoured Division then passed through the gap to the Wadi Merteba, the enemy falling back with heavy losses in tanks, guns and men. This attack was supported by a very heavy and successful bombardment from 22 squadrons of the Western Desert Air Force.

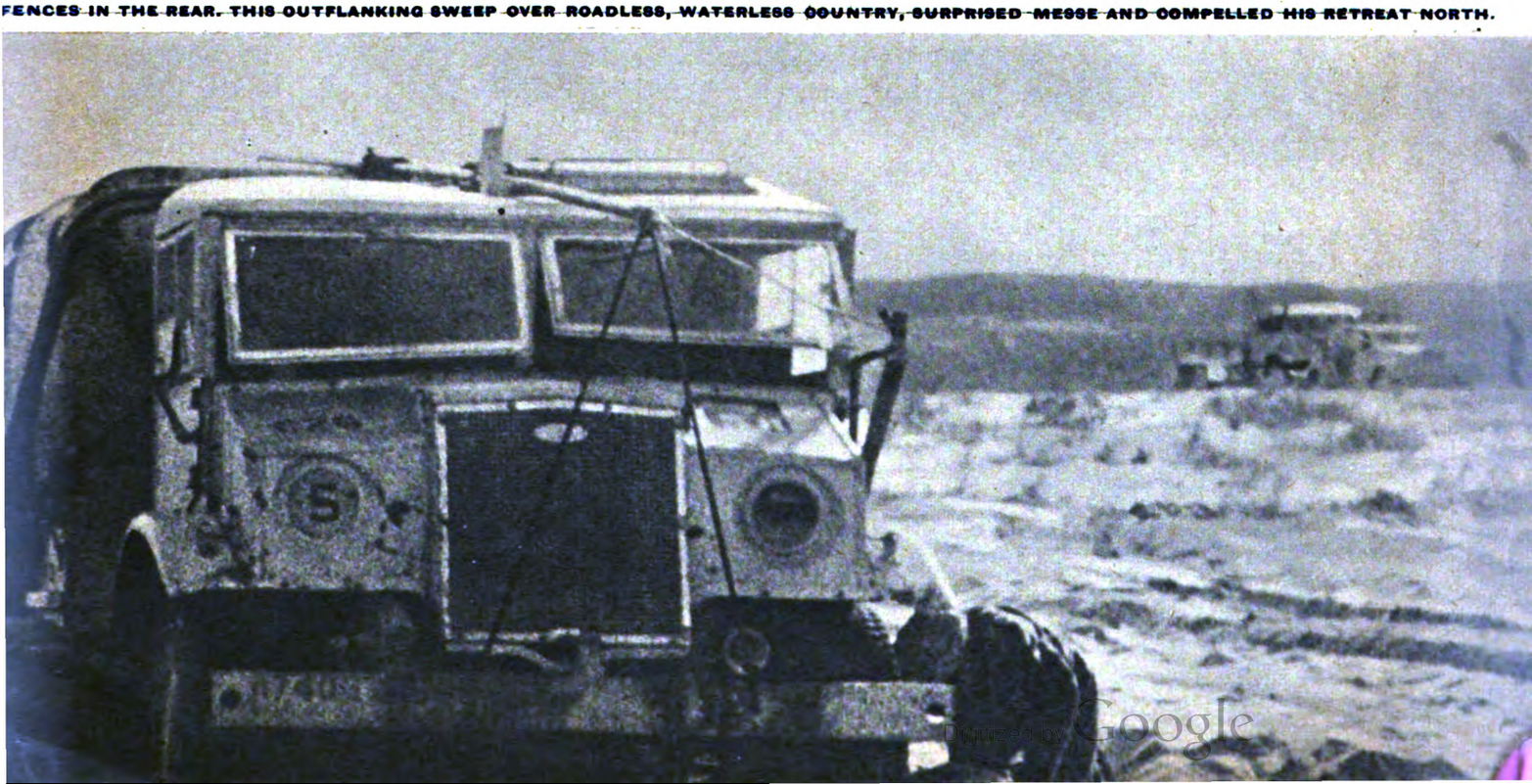
It was obvious now that the Axis position at Mareth had been outflanked, and the 90th and 164th German Divisions and all the remaining armour available were diverted from Mareth to the El Hamma area to reinforce the 21st Panzer Division and the large force of German and Italian infantry already engaged there. There was very hard fighting, but they could not stop the advance, and by midday on 27th March our troops were within two miles of El Hamma and Italians were surrendering in large numbers. The remaining Germans were clinging to El Hamma itself and the wadis near it.

In the meantime, on 27th March, the 4th Indian Division was pressing down from the hills on to Toujane, and the 7th Armoured Division with an Infantry Brigade were pushing along the road towards the same goal. They threatened the flank of the whole position and the enemy had to fall back. By last light on the next day the 50th Division was in Mareth and the 51st Division was two miles beyond the Zarat-Mareth road; Toujane was in our hands. That night the enemy evacuated El Hamma, and on 29th March Gabes fell. The only enemy left were scattered detachments on the banks of the Chott Jerid, and with them the French camel troops dealt faithfully.

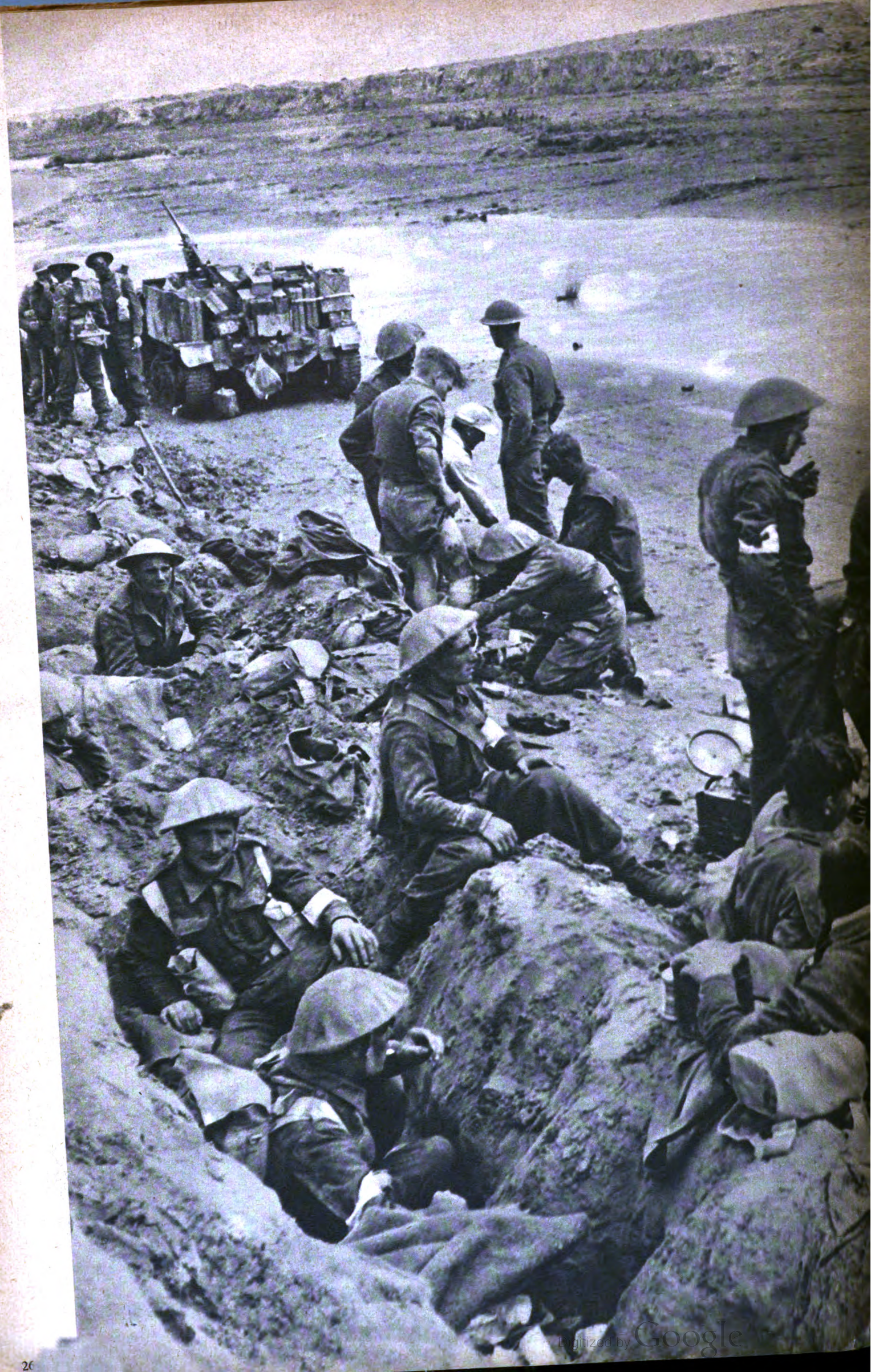


TIRED GUNNERS lie asleep beside their ammunition during a break in the shelling of the Line.

FENCES IN THE REAR. THIS OUTFLANKING SWEEP OVER ROADLESS, WATERLESS COUNTRY, SURPRISED MESSE AND COMPELLED HIS RETREAT NORTH.



Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google



Wounded men by the waterlogged Wadi Zigzaou. The frontal attack is stuck.

Digitized by Google



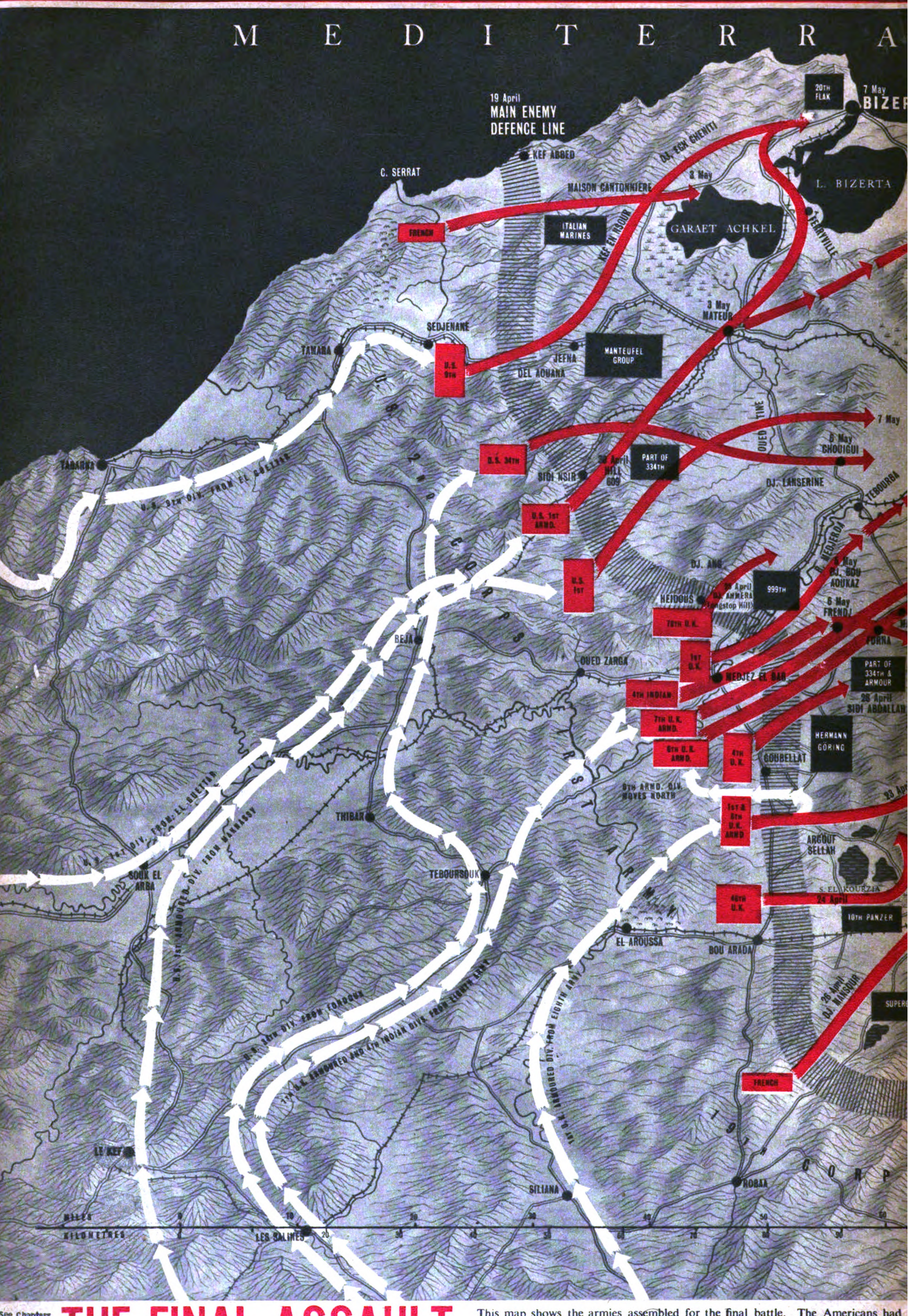
AXIS PRISONERS, MOSTLY ITALIANS, PLOD TOWARDS THE DRAWN-UP TRANSPORT OF THE NEW ZEALANDERS IN THE EL HAMMA FUNNEL. THE NEW

Digitized by Google



ZEALANDERS HAVE FORCED A GAP IN THE AXIS DEFENCES. THE BRITISH ARMOUR HAS PASSED THROUGH AND DEFEATED THE GERMAN ARMOUR.

Digitized by Google



See Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Pages 42-59

THE FINAL ASSAULT

This map shows the armies assembled for the final battle. The Americans had moved from southern Tunisia (white arrows) to take over in the north from the First Army which now concentrated in the centre. Then came the French and

Digitized by Google

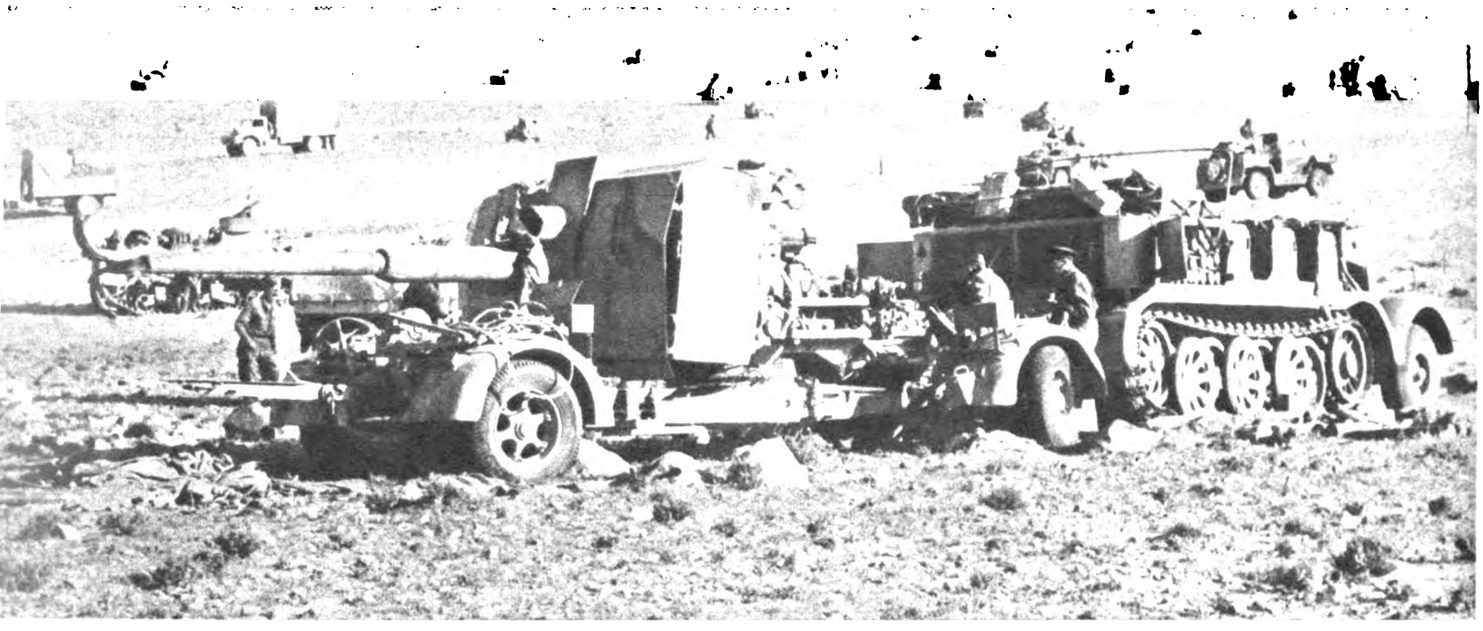


lastly the Eighth Army, facing steep mountains. The attack opened on 19th April in the south, and spread up the line. The break-through came in the first week of May, when the Americans took Mateur and the First Army reinforced by Eighth Army Divisions fought their way into the plain of Tunis. Solid red arrows sho movements during this period. Broken red arrows show the encirclement, after th fall of Tunis and Bizerta, which paralysed enemy resistance and led to total surrende

Digitized by Google



CRUSADERS ADVANCE INTO EL HAMMA after their victory over the 1st Panzer Division in the tank battle to the west of the town. This victory broke open the Axis defences of southern Tunisia and cleared the way for the advance into Gabes. The German signboard says: "Fresh water here."



THE BATTLEFIELD near El Hamma was littered with enemy equipment. Above is a German 88 mm. gun. Unable to get it away, the enemy has spiked it.

NEW ZEALAND TRANSPORT crosses the river at the entrance to Gabes. Here they met the Highlanders who had advanced along the coast from Mareth.

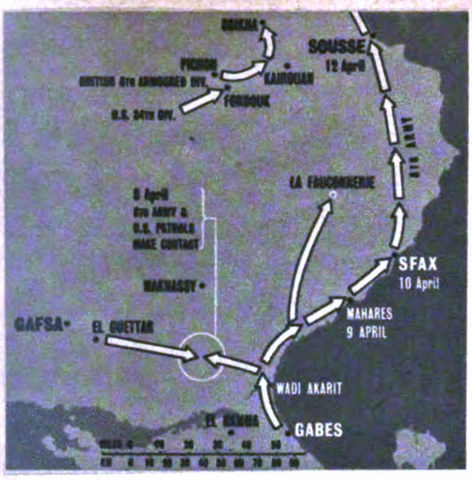


Digitized by Google



THE BLACK WATCH ARE PIPED INTO GABES, WHICH THEY TOOK ON 29TH MARCH. THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY TO WADI AKARIT.

Digitized by Google



30 MARCH—12 APRIL. An attempt to hold the Wadi Akarit is broken and the pursuit continues.

7. THE BATTLE OF WADI AKARIT

General Messe had decided on making a fresh stand along the Wadi Akarit, behind which a broken line of hills crosses the gap between the El Hamma salt marsh and the sea. He was not given time to prepare defences and mine the approaches, but the position was by nature strong. Here he drew up his infantry, while what was left of his armour was posted well behind, probably to refit, but also with the idea of coping with a possible advance by the U.S. Second Corps from El Guettar against his rear. Such an advance was attempted on 30th March, but the tanks ran into minefields and came up against tank opposition and no progress could be made. The Eighth Army pushed forward and took up battle positions, while for five days our patrols were reconnoitring the enemy lines.

During the night of 5th April, the 2nd Gurkha Rifles, on the extreme left of our line, advanced in the pitch dark (it was a moonless night), and, taking the enemy completely by surprise, secured the Jebel Beida and took 600 prisoners. At four o'clock on the morning of 6th April, in complete darkness, after a 15-minute barrage, the general attack was launched. The 51st Division was on the right, the 50th Division in the centre and the 4th Indian Division on the left. By four o'clock in the afternoon the two hills, Jebel Roumana and Jebel Fatnassa, in the centre and west of the enemy's line, had been stormed and 5,000 prisoners had been taken. When a counter-attack by German tanks and infantry had been driven off by the 50th Division, and another against the 4th Indian Division had also failed, it was clear that the Axis had again suffered a severe defeat. The toll of prisoners had risen to 9,500. During the night the enemy fell back northwards, leaving much booty in our hands, and with our armour harassing his retreat. At the same time he began to pull in his outlying forces at El Guettar and Maknassy; the rearguards suffered heavily at the hands of the U.S. 1st Armoured Division. On 8th April American patrols from El Guettar made contact with Eighth Army patrols on the Gabes road.

On 9th April Mahares was entered, and on the following day, Sfax. The 7th



OVER A CROSS-ROAD IN THE HILLS ABOVE WADI AKARIT, THE EIGHTH ARMY IS MOVING ON. VALENTINE

Digitized by Google



TANKS THREAD THEIR WAY PAST CAPTURED LORRIES, TRUCKS AND HOWITZERS. A GROUP OF PRISONERS TRUDGES AWAY TO THE LEFT.

Digitized by Google



MARKING THE GAP. After working under very heavy fire, sappers have cleared a minefield at Wadi Akarit, and British armour and transport begin to pass through the gap. The attack, launched on 5th April, was completely successful. By nightfall on the next day the position had fallen and the enemy was retreating northwards.

Armoured Division and the 51st Division as advance guard moved up the coast road, while the 1st Armoured Division farther inland was directed on Kairouan. The Kerkenna islands were occupied by a detachment from Malta.

With these rapid movements the U.S. divisions at Maknassy and El Guettar were left behind the shifting battle area, and it was for the Allied force at Fondouk to play a part in the great offensive. The U.S. 34th Division had reached Fondouk at the end of March, but had been unable to make headway. On 9th April the 6th Armoured Division forced the Fondouk Pass after a hard fight. Enemy forces held the hills on either side of the mined road, and though the northern hill was soon taken, those on the southern hill resisted our attack. In the end, a force of tanks deliberately charged the minefield, as fire from the south made it impossible for the infantry to clear it. This force got through with a loss of 20 tanks. The lane thus formed was widened by our sappers, working under heavy fire, and the remainder of our tanks passed through the gap. The U.S. 34th Infantry Division mopped up the hills north and south of the gap, and the 6th Armoured Division and its supporting infantry, together with the French (whose leader, General Welwert, was killed), extended the conquest of the high ground. The 6th Armoured Division then pushed on and successfully engaged enemy tanks in a battle near Kairouan. By-passing the town, it reached Sbikha on 11th April at about the time when the British 1st Armoured Division, pushing up from the south, had seized the great enemy airfield at La Fauconnerie on the Sfax–Faid road. Next day, forward troops of the Eighth Army operating in the coastal sector entered Sousse without opposition.

AMERICAN INFANTRY AND TANKS MOVE FORWARD IN THE DUSTY HILLS OF THE BIR MARBOTT PASS NINE MILES DOWN THE GABES ROAD FROM EL





BRITISH TANKS, keeping between the sappers' tapes, pass over the enemy's anti-tank ditch at Wadi Akarit. The enemy defences were based on the wadi itself. Then, when the wadi petered out, its line was continued by this anti-tank ditch to the foot of the Fatnassa Hills, here seen in the background. This soldier of the Black Watch is posted on the Roumana Hills. Both these dominating heights had to be stormed by infantry before the way could be opened.

GUETTAR. THE AXIS ARMOUR HELD THEM BACK FROM STRONG POSITIONS ABOVE THE PASS, WHERE SHELLS ARE BURSTING FROM AMERICAN ARTILLERY



Digitized by Google



SHING ON past the Gabes gap, some British tanks took the coast road to-rds Sfax; others kept inland, making for Kairouan. This is a Valentine.



IN THE HILLS to the west a Priest gun advances with the 1st U.S. Armoured Division. The Axis rearguards withdrawing northwards were roughly handled.



ESE TWO SERGEANTS were the first to exchange greetings when British d American patrols met on the Gabes road on the afternoon of 7th April.



THIS ROADSIDE SIGN of welcome was put up by Americans in the palm-clad hills by El Guettar. Actually the meeting took place later on the coastal plain.



ISONERS taken at Fondouk prepare to leave the battlefield. The pass s forced by British armour, and cleaned up by U.S. and French infantry.



AN ARMOURED CAR CREW of the Eighth Army greet a First Army Sherman tank crew outside Kairouan. The town fell the day after the forcing of the pass.

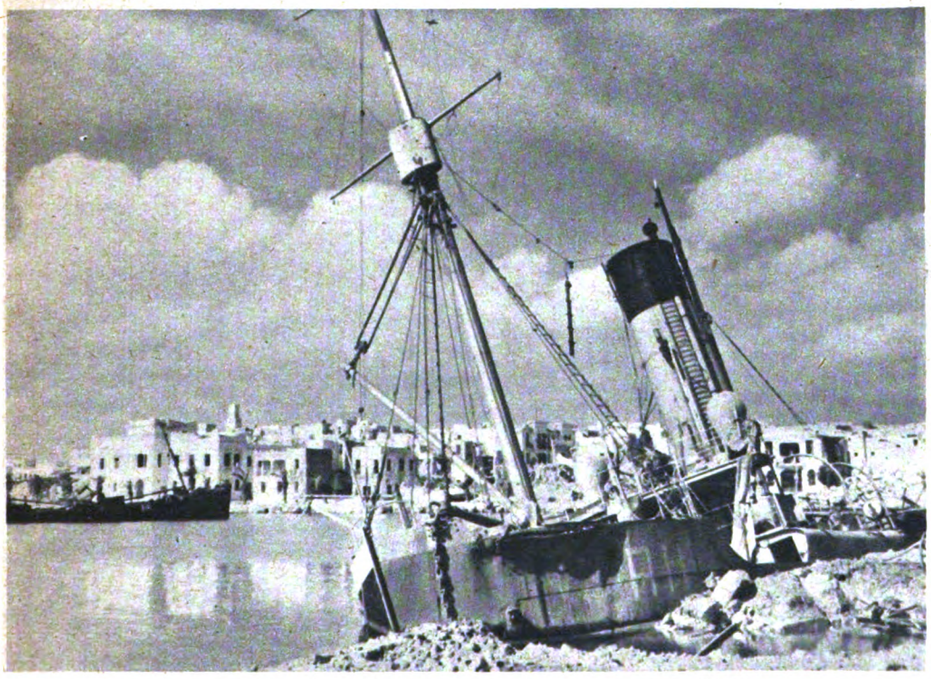
Digitized by Google



ALGERIAN TIRAILLEURS are passing through Ousseltia to the front line. French forces held the Allied positions around Ousseltia, meeting repeated enemy attacks for many weeks.



TROOPS OF THE FRENCH CHAD ARMY drive through Kairouan. After crossing the desert from the south, they entered Tunisia with the Eighth Army, reaching Kairouan the day after its fall.



WRECKED SHIPS and a blasted quay in Sousse marked the effectiveness of Allied air attacks. When the Eighth Army entered the port on 12th April it found harbour, railways, and stores destroyed.



INDIANS of the 4th Division, fresh from their victory at Wadi Akarit, were the first to enter Sfax.



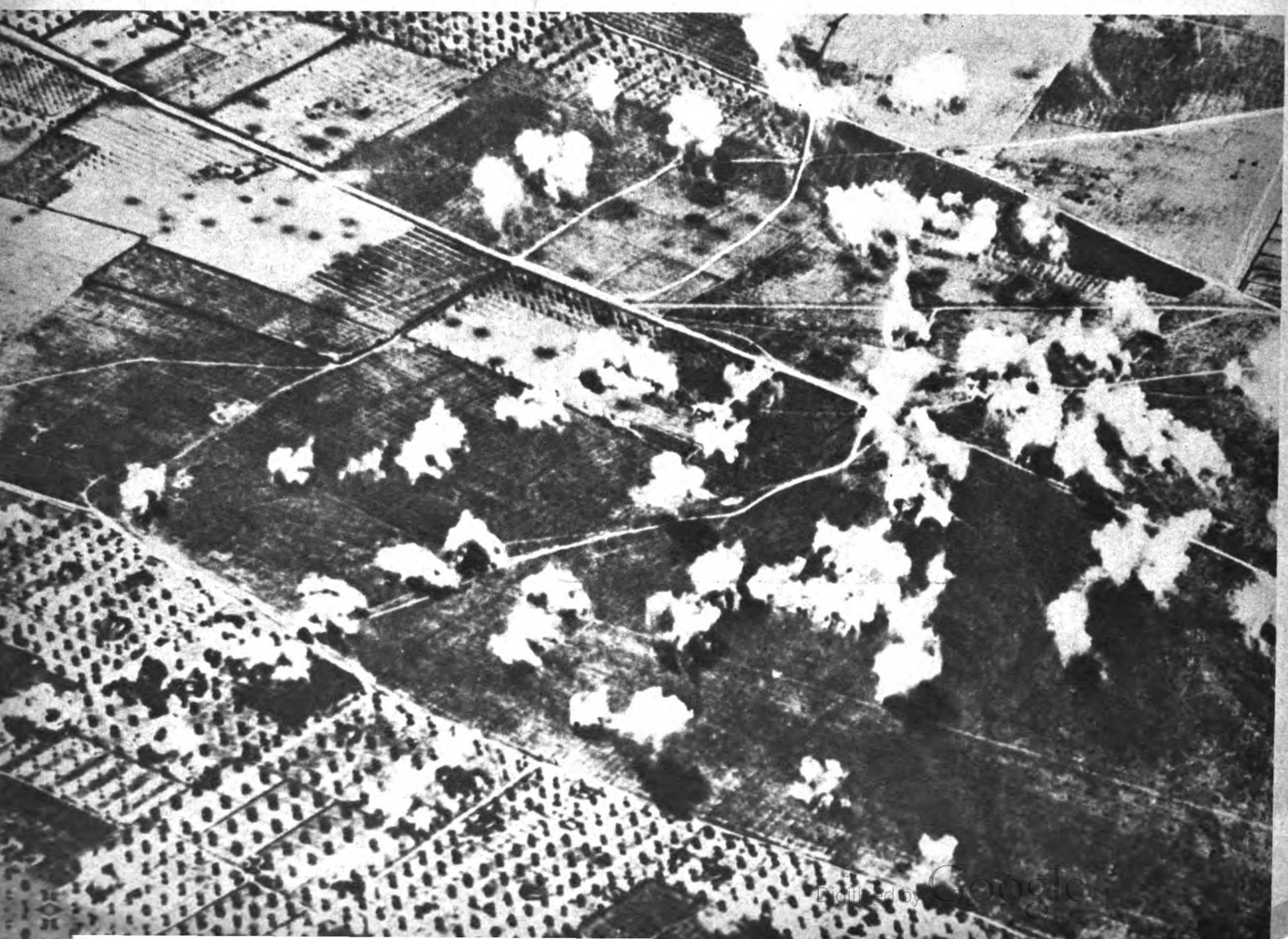
A NEW ZEALAND TRAFFIC CONTROLLER directs a convoy of the N.Z. Division through Sousse.

Digitized by Google

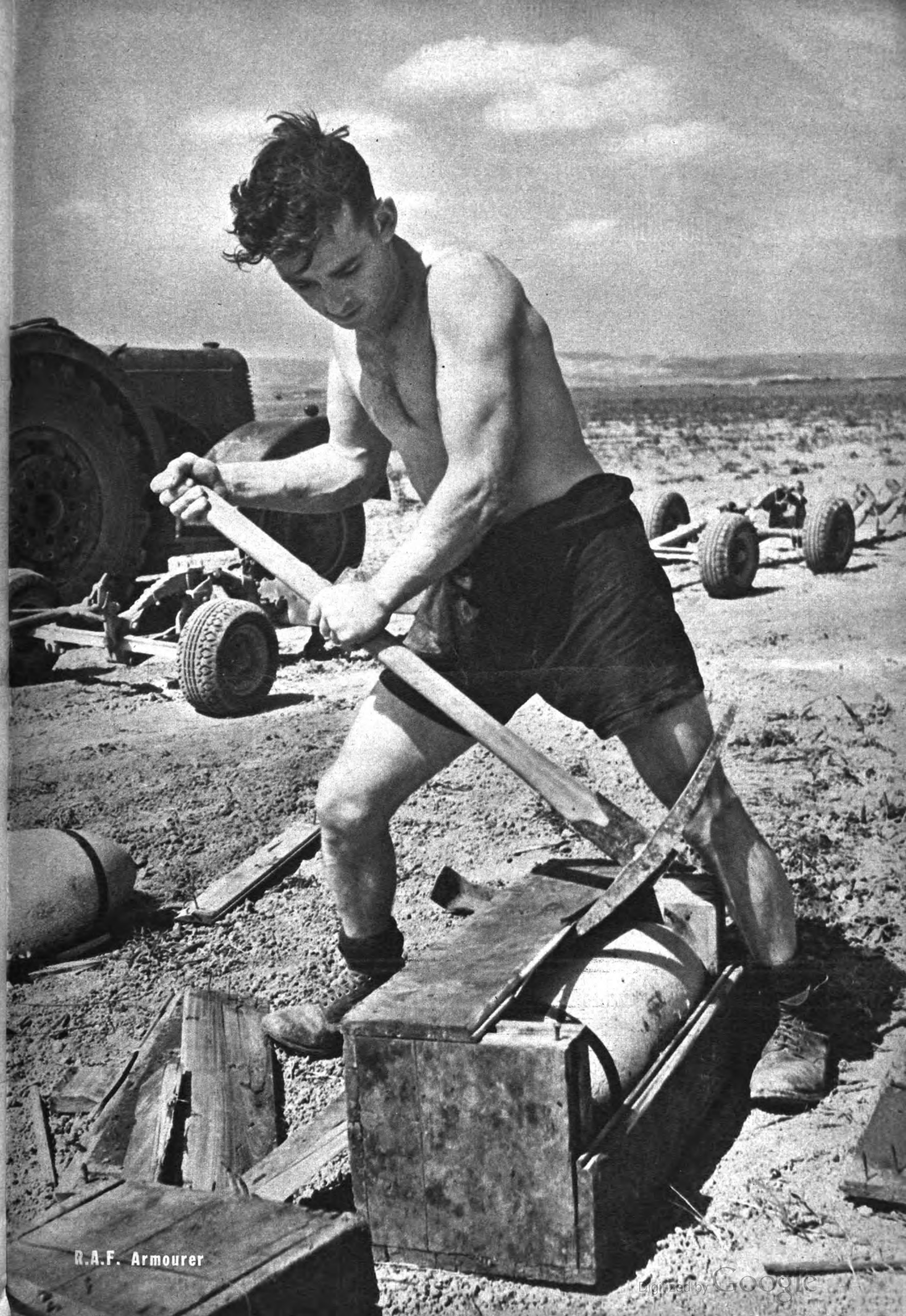


BOSTON BOMBERS of the Royal Air Force cross the Tunisian ranges to attack enemy airfields. Thousands of feet below, the road winds through mountainous country. As the armies prepared for the main offensive, Allied aircraft maintained a continuous bombardment of enemy airfields and communications.

BOMBS ARE BURSTING all over the landing ground at Sfax as R.A.F. Baltimores and South African Bostons pin down the enemy air forces before the Allied entry into the town. Orchards and plantations surround the landing field, where craters made in previous attacks can be seen among the explosions.



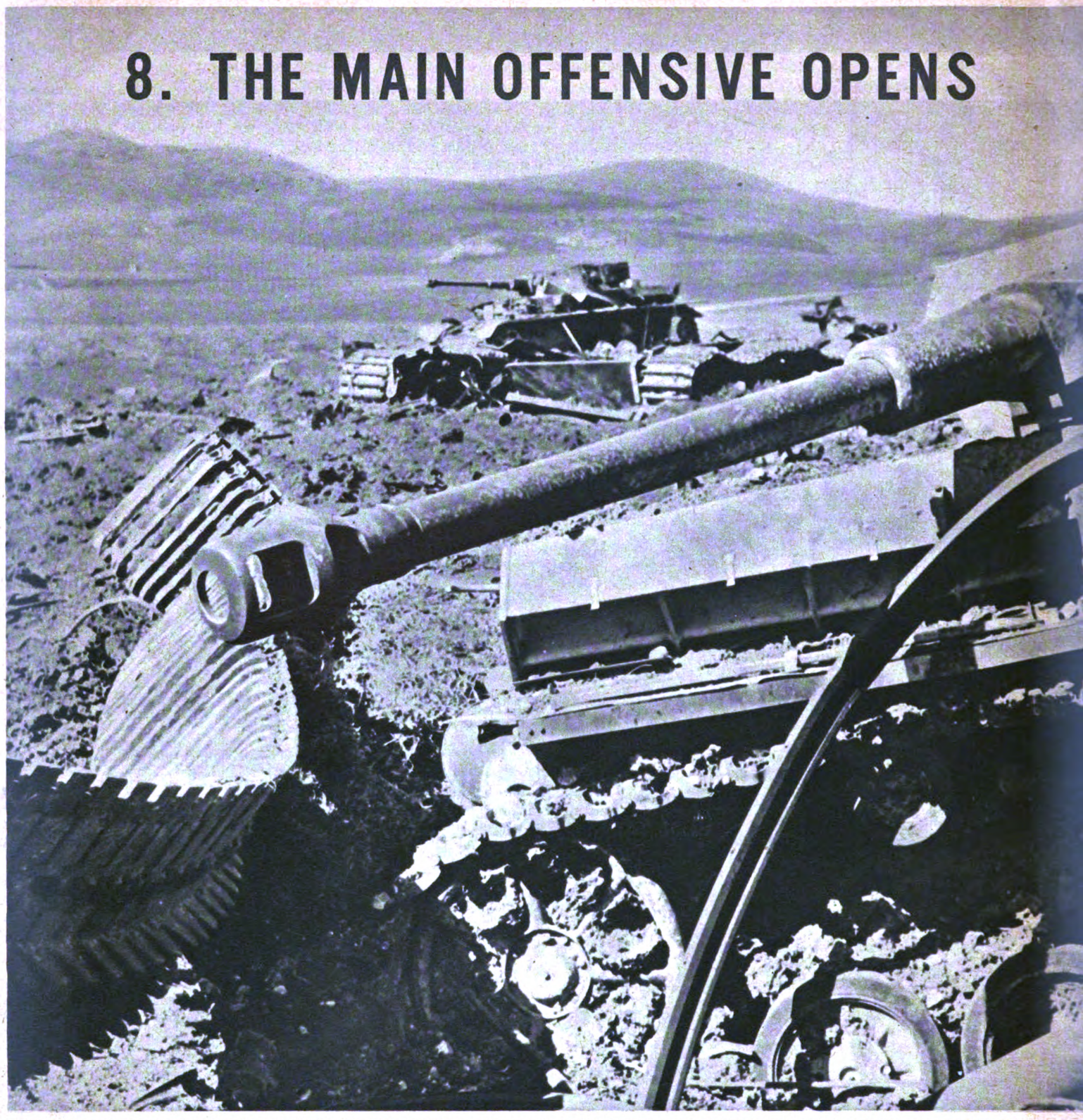
Digitized by Google



R.A.F. Armourer

Digitized by Google

8. THE MAIN OFFENSIVE OPENS

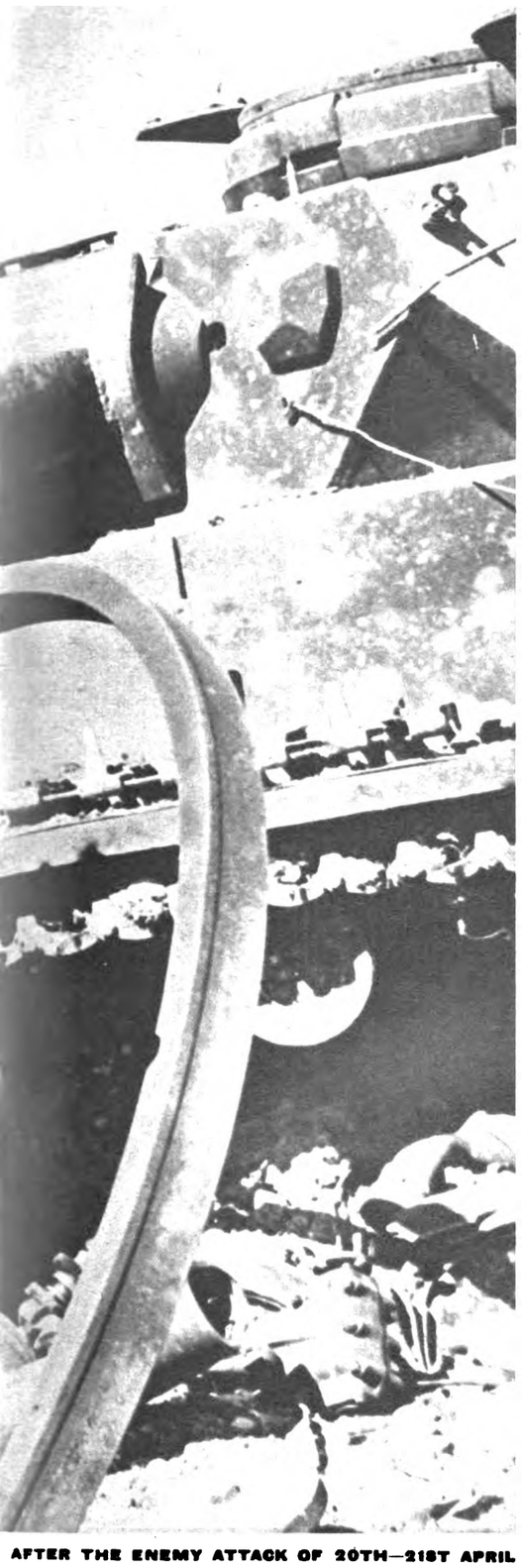


TRACKS AND TURRET RING BLOWN OFF, WRECKED AND BOGGED, THIS MARK VI TIGER TANK LIES WITH OTHERS IN THE HILLS EAST OF MEDJEZ EL BAB

The general position was now this. In the space of three weeks General Messe had lost about 30,000 prisoners and probably half as many in killed and wounded, the great bulk of his armour and a very large number of guns; he had lost all the stores concentrated in dumps in the south, and a large part of his motor transport ; he had had to abandon a number of airfields and his air force had suffered terribly, so that we now had definite supremacy in the air. Thanks to the activities of the Royal Navy and the Allied Air Forces, the sea passage to Tunisia had of late become much more dangerous to Axis supply ships, which were being sunk in large numbers; and in four days nearly 100 carrier aircraft, a type hitherto practically immune, had been shot down. At the same time, Messe had achieved his purpose of effecting a junction with von Arnim's Tunisian army, though the strength which he brought with him was much less than he had hoped to bring. There was no intention of evacuating the country; the plan was the same as before, to hold out as long as possible so as to deny us the Mediterranean passage and postpone action against the European Continent ; indeed, von Arnim, who now assumed supreme command as G.O.C.-in-C. "African Army Group," was still receiving reinforcements in men and material from overseas. A defensive position had been prepared beforehand running from Enfidaville to Pont du Fahs and so north across the hills to Kef Abbed on the north Tunisian coast. General Messe was now deploying his forces along the hills forming the southern part of this line where anti-tank ditches and fortifications in depth could bar the way to the Eighth Army.

By the middle of April, the opposing forces were confronting each other along a line about 110 miles long forming an arc of a circle centred on Tunis. On the right of the Allied line was the Eighth Army, from the sea to a point 25 miles inland. Next on its left came the French 19th Corps, covering a front of about 25 miles in the high ground on each side of the Oued Kebir. Then the First Army (to which had been transferred the British 1st Armoured Division from the Eighth Army) extended for about 30 miles from Bou Arada to the heights north-west of Medjez el Bab. The remaining 30 miles of the front, almost up to the sea, was taken over by the U.S. Second Corps, now under Major-General Omar Bradley, relieving

Digitized by Google



AFTER THE ENEMY ATTACK OF 20TH—21ST APRIL

The enemy dispositions were as follows : on his left, north of Enfidaville, a belt of steep heights extended inland to the region of Pont du Fahs. Here was stationed the First Italian Army (including the Afrika Korps) composed of the German 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, 90th and 164th Light Infantry Divisions, the Italian Centauro (Armoured) Division, together with the remains of the Trieste, Pistoia and " Young Fascists " Infantry Divisions and some detached units.

In the centre of the enemy line, from Pont du Fahs to the Medjerda river, were posted (from south to north) the Italian Superga Division, the German 10th Panzer Division, the Hermann Göring Infantry Division and part of the 334th Infantry Division, together with a Heavy Tank Battalion, all belonging to the 5th Panzer Army.

On the enemy's right, in the broken hilly country south and west of Bizerta, was the remainder of the 5th Panzer Army, consisting of the rest of the German 334th Infantry Division, the 999th Infantry Division, the Manteufel Group, and some Italian Bersaglieri and Marines. In addition, there was a number of scratch " Marsch " battalions, and finally there were two German anti-aircraft Divisions stationed at Tunis and Bizerta.

The strength of the two opposing armies was in personnel not unevenly matched. The Allies had a distinct superiority in guns, a very great superiority in armour, and they now had the mastery of the air. On the other hand, the enemy's position was a strong one from the point of view of defence. Only in the centre, between Medjez el Bab and Pont du Fahs, was the nature of the terrain such as to allow relatively free movement of our armour; and here isolated hills, such as Jebel Bou Kournine in the south and Jebel Bou Aoukaz in the north, could be, and had been, made into strong points which would minimise that danger. Although the Axis possessed interior lines, enabling a threatened point to be reinforced more easily than we could mass for attack (our lines of communication being separated by difficult hill ranges), the initiative was with us. The Axis commander could only guess at our intentions. And he guessed wrong. Mesmerised by the exploits of the Eighth Army, he expected the main attack to come from the south.

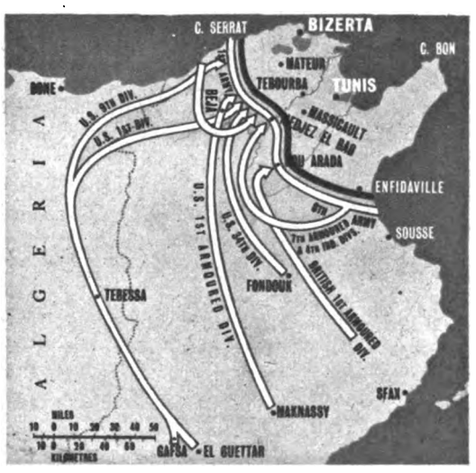
General Alexander's plan was to launch an attack by the Eighth Army on the enemy's left. If the enemy's resistance in this section should prove too strong for the Eighth Army to make rapid progress, this attack would serve the purpose of pinning down the enemy's forces in the Enfidaville region, and General Alexander would then attack in the centre with the First Army. This is, in fact, what occurred. Accordingly, at 9.30 in the evening of 19th April the Eighth Army delivered an attack on the enemy positions in the coastal belt area of Enfidaville. After 90 minutes' artillery preparation, infantry of the 50th Division advanced and secured the first objectives. By 11 a.m. on 20th April Enfidaville had been occupied and our patrols then pushed forward two or three miles north of the town. North-west of Enfidaville, the 2nd New Zealand Division and an Armoured Brigade advanced in the area of Takrouna in face of heavy enemy mortar and artillery fire.

Farther to the west the 4th Indian Infantry Division, together with some armour and a force of Fighting French, advanced into the hill region of Jebel Garci, eight miles west of Enfidaville. Farther still to the west, other British units brought the line of the Eighth Army to a point four miles north-east of Djebibina. By the end of the day (20th April) all gains had been held, four enemy counter-attacks had been beaten off and 800 prisoners had been taken.

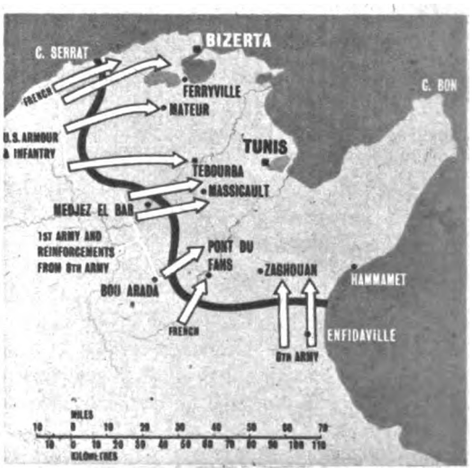
On 21st April heavy fighting continued on the Enfidaville sector. After a bitter struggle the enemy had been driven off the high ground of Takrouna by the New Zealanders, and by evening two major enemy counter-attacks had been repulsed by mass artillery fire. The number of prisoners captured on this sector was now 1,400.

Meanwhile, on the night of 20th–21st April, the enemy, knowing that a large armoured force had been concentrated in this area, launched a spoiling attack against Medjez el Bab and Bou Arada. The strength of the enemy was five battalions of infantry (mostly from the Hermann Göring Division), supported by 60 to 80 tanks of the 10th Panzer Division and of the 501st Heavy Tank Battalion. Some infiltration took place, but after confused fighting our positions were all firmly held by the British 1st Division. By dawn the enemy had started to withdraw, having lost 33 tanks destroyed (including some Mark VIs) and leaving 500 prisoners in our hands. Not only was the enemy repulsed, but he failed completely in his object of spoiling our dispositions for attack. For on the very next day, 22nd April, the First Army launched a strong offensive eastwards from the line of the Bou Arada–Goubellat road. On the right, north-east of Bou Arada, the 46th Division advanced to the high ground south of Sebkra el Kourzia,

Lieut.-General George S. Patton, who had been assigned to the command of the U.S. 7th Army in preparation for the subsequent invasion of Sicily. In ten days this Corps, consisting of the U.S. 1st Armoured Division and the U.S. 1st, 9th and 34th Divisions, had moved over 200 miles from Southern Tunisia to its new positions, passing right across the lines of communication of the First Army; yet such was the efficiency of the staff work that although very heavy traffic streams were crossing each other at right angles, there were no hitches. The appearance of U.S. forces in the north was a complete surprise to the Axis Commanders. Air superiority prevented the enemy from seeing this move. Lastly, on the extreme left of the Allied line on the coast were some French units of the Corps Franc d'Afrique and Goums.



13—19 APRIL. Allied formations move into position opposite the enemy's 110-mile prepared defence line.



20 APRIL—5 MAY. Breaches are made in the line. The main attack is then switched to the centre.

Digitized by Google

GUNNERS LOAD A 3·7 ON THE CENTRAL SECTOR WHERE FIRST ARMY INFANTRY, IN THE MAIN OFFENSIVE, WERE HOLDING MOST OF THEIR GAINS.

NEMY STRAGGLERS are rounded up from the Djebel Mansour by Moroccan oops of the French 19th Corps. The French moved on to Pont du Fahs.



GERMAN PRISONERS are brought in from Longstop by First Army troops. This key position, north of Medjez, was captured on 25th April, after bitter fighting.



Digitized by Google



EIGHTH ARMY PATROLS comb Enfidaville, on the southern front, following its capture early in the offensive. The Eighth Army's part was to deliver a holding attack on the enemy's left flank. If rapid progress proved impossible, this attack would pin down enemy forces while the main attack was made in the centre.

from which, however, they had to make a slight withdrawal under pressure from an enemy counter-attack. Farther north our troops, although held up at first, made good progress and reached Argoub Sellah.

On 23rd April our troops in the Bou Arada area resumed their advance and occupied the features of Mehalla and Argouf. On their left, tanks of the 6th Armoured Division advanced and continued to press eastwards, engaging enemy armour, and reaching a line north-east of Sebkra el Kourzia. The number of enemy tanks destroyed during the day was 16.

Farther to the left, an attack was launched east of Medjez el Bab by troops of the British 1st Division who captured their first objectives and retained them with the exception of one point, after strong enemy counter-attacks.

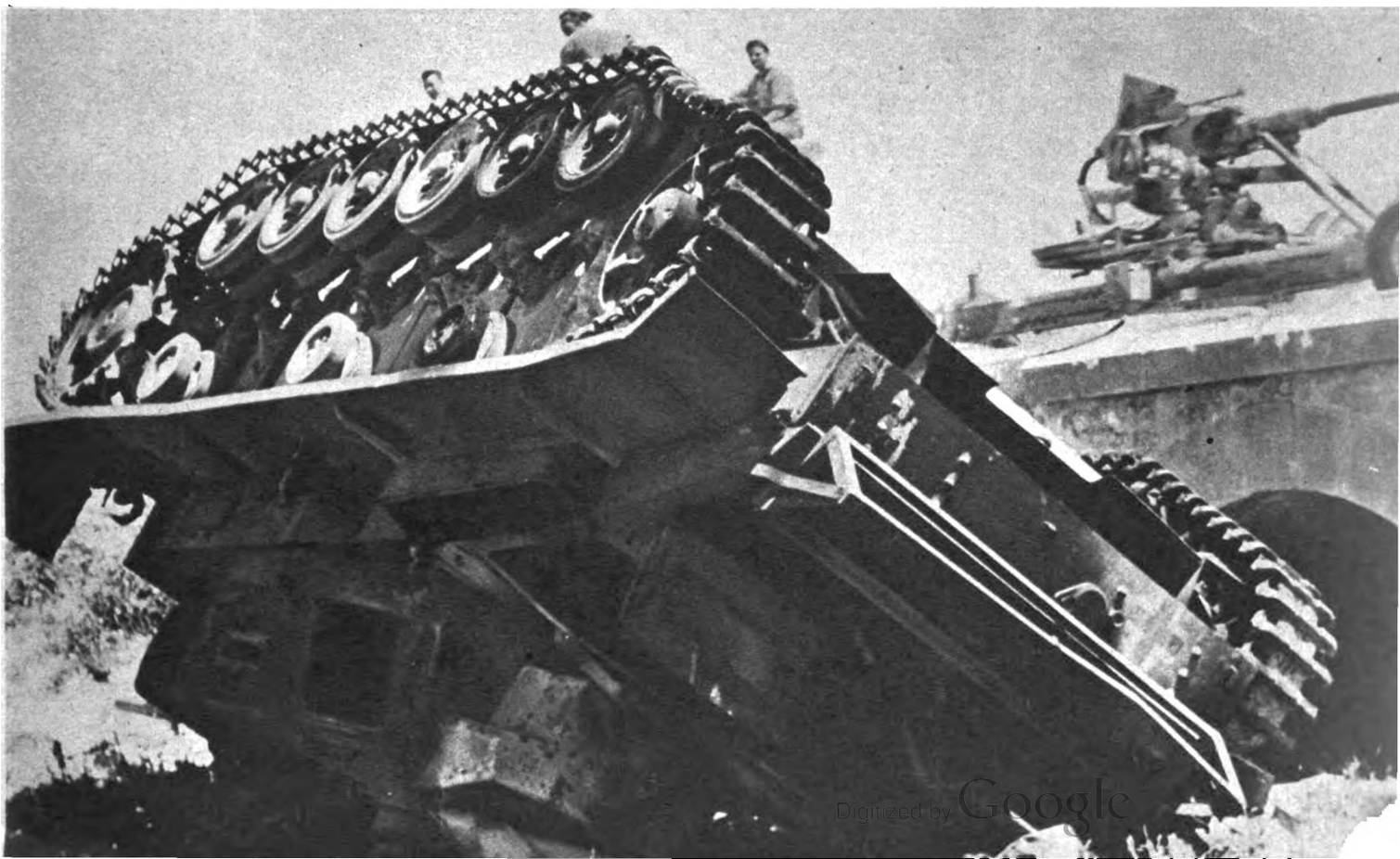
North of Medjez el Bab British troops of the 78th Division succeeded in capturing Jebel Ahmera ("Longstop Hill"), except for the north-eastern slopes. In all sectors, the enemy put up a fierce resistance and the advance of our troops was difficult and costly.

Meanwhile, in the Sidi Nsir and Sedjenane sectors, the U.S. Second Corps, coming into action for the first time on this part of the front, scored an immediate success, gaining all their first objectives and capturing many prisoners. To the north of them, on the coast, French Goums, who had throughout given proof of their excellent fighting qualities, advanced some ten miles east from Cap Serrat.

On 24th April hard fighting against bitter opposition continued throughout the day along most of the front. In the central sector during the night of 24th–25th April troops of the 46th Division captured Si Mabrouk, south of Sebkra el Kourzia.

The struggle continued throughout 25th April, and in the area of Sebkra el Kourzia armoured engagements resulted in the destruction of 19 more enemy tanks. North of Medjez el Bab, "Longstop Hill" was completely cleared of the enemy and our troops captured Jebel Tanngouch and Heidous village, taking some 260 prisoners, mostly Germans. On the Sedjenane–Mateur

A MARK III TANK LIES OVERTURNED BESIDE THE TUNIS ROAD. OVER THE BRIDGE A BOFORS GUN MOVES UP WITH THE ADVANCING TROOPS.



Digitized by Google

road two Combat Teams of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division made a further advance and occupied Del Aouana station.

On 26th April, in the central sector, tank battles continued and five enemy tanks were destroyed, three Mark VIs and two Mark IVs. Farther to the south the French 19th Corps, closely following up the enemy withdrawal, occupied Jebel Mansour, and, advancing on Jebel Fikrine and in the direction of Pont du Fahs, debouched on the plain three miles from the town. On 27th April they cut the road leading south-east from Pont du Fahs to Enfidaville, and their patrols temporarily entered Pont du Fahs.

On the Medjez el Bab front, enemy resistance continued to be extremely tenacious and a German counter-attack eventually succeeded in compelling our forces to fall back about 1,000 yards, from Sidi Abdallah to Sidi Salem, eight miles east of Medjez el Bab. But at the same time other British forces including Guards battalions began an attack on Jebel Bou Aoukaz, an isolated hill on the south bank of the Medjerda river which commanded the Medjez–Tebourba road. On the next morning they had captured the hill, but after two enemy counter-attacks with infantry and 35 tanks, they were forced to give up part of the ground gained. On Jebel Heidous, north of Medjez el Bab, good progress was made, while farther north still the U.S. Second Corps, pushing along the Beja-Mateur road, had occupied Sidi Nsir on 27th April, and next day advanced farther east. Here the enemy was now drawing in his salient and fighting was confined to rearguard actions ; in the coastal sector his retreat was still more marked and by the evening of 28th April he was not more than five miles west of the Achkel lake. On that evening British troops of the 4th Division recaptured Sidi Abdallah, which had been lost on the previous day; the enemy counter-attacked violently, but his attacks were broken up, ten of his tanks destroyed and prisoners taken.

On the same night, 28th–29th April, at the point of junction between the Eighth Army and the French 19th Corps, where good progress had already been made, an attack by troops of the 46th Division secured the western slopes of Jebel Bou Kournine, the fortified hill which was General von Arnim's chief bulwark at the south end of the central sector. For the moment it looked as if the way might have been opened up for the British 1st Armoured Division, but a strong screen of anti-tank guns continued to block the advance.

The days of 29th and 30th April were marked by confused and bloody fighting on the central sector, east of Medjez el Bab, with the enemy launching determined counter-attacks supported by as many as 40 tanks drawn from the 15th Panzer Division, which had been moved from the southern sector. In general, our troops held their positions, and in only a few places, such as Sidi Abdallah, did the enemy gain a little ground, at the cost of heavy casualties. On our side also casualties were heavy.

In the northern sector continued progress was made by American and French troops, with the enemy withdrawing gradually in some sectors and counter-attacking with little or no success in others. On 30th April the U.S. 34th Division scored a notable success by the capture of Hill 609, east of Sidi Nsir, and repulsed determined enemy counter-attacks launched to retake it. This brilliant action enabled the U.S. 1st Division to capture neighbouring positions on the right, and marked the turning point of enemy resistance in this sector.

During the whole period of the battle, from 21st April onwards, the Allied Air Forces developed great activity against enemy troops in the field, on roads behind the front, on stores in bases like Tunis and Bizerta, against enemy shipping and air transport, and enemy bases in Sicily, Sardinia and Italy. Particularly successful days were 22nd April, when about 30 large six-engined Me. 323 transport planes were shot down, and 30th April, when eight ships, including a light cruiser and two destroyers, were sunk or damaged.

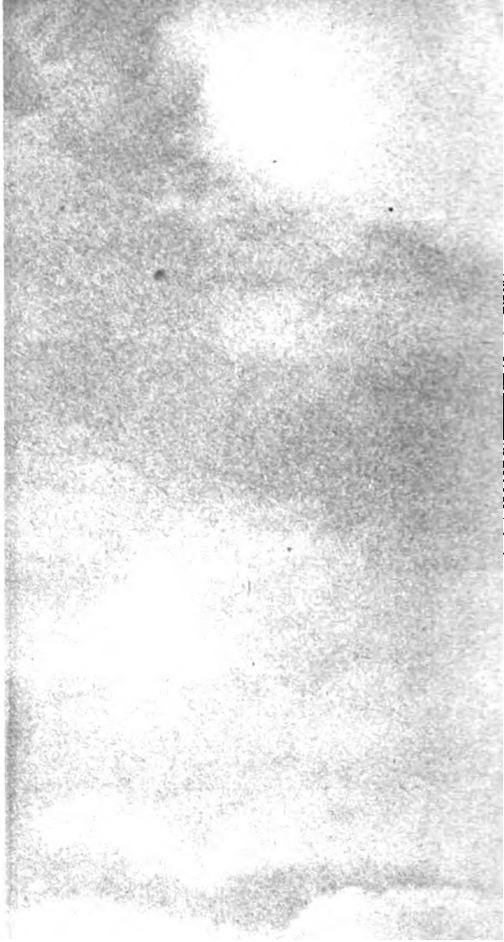
By the end of April it had become clear that the enemy was determined to cling tenaciously to the Enfidaville range of hills, his strongest natural position. In the central sector, although we had greatly bettered our position, the enemy still held the high ground which denied us the use of our armour, and his resistance was not easily to be broken, while his withdrawal in the northern and coastal sector would put at his disposal large additional forces to stiffen the defence of his centre. On 30th April General Alexander ordered the 7th Armoured Division and the 4th Indian Division, both of which had been in North Africa since the beginning of operations in 1940, to move from the Eighth Army front to Medjez el Bab, where they came under the First Army.

By this time the Allied air forces had achieved complete supremacy over the battlefield.

On 1st May and the following days there was a slight lull, during which our positions were locally improved. In the north, another enemy counter-attack was repulsed. The 60th Combat Team of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division and the 6th Tabor of the Corps Franc d'Afrique made good progress ; they had advanced along the coast to a point 16 miles east of Cap Serrat, and on 1st May captured 650 prisoners. Under this pressure the enemy was forced to retreat from his advanced positions, and on 3rd May came the first great break-through. The U.S. 1st Armoured Division, under Major-General Harmon, advanced from the direction of Sidi Nsir and entered Mateur. The capture of this strategic point meant the cracking of the enemy's defence in the north, for Mateur was the hub of a network of roads, and lay astride the railway from Bizerta to Tunis. Other American forces advanced past Jefna and, farther north, occupied the high ground of Kef En Nsour, capturing 200 prisoners, while French forces farther north still advanced past Maison Cantonniere and reached the northern shore of the Garaet Achkel Lake. On the following day this progress was continued. An enemy counter-attack north of Garaet Achkel was repulsed, and the enemy withdrew to a line 13 miles west of Bizerta.

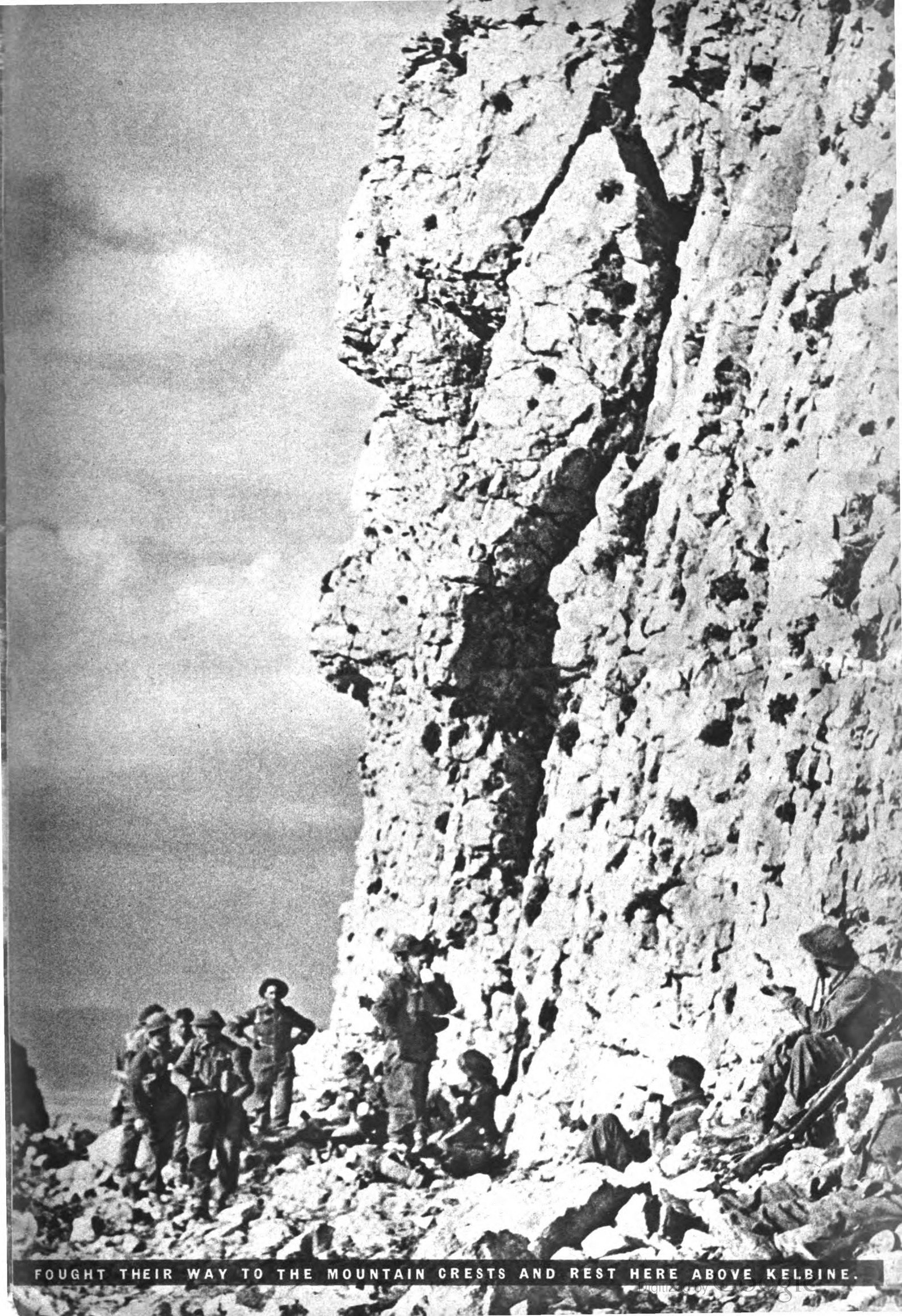
On 4th May there was heavy fighting in the central sector, which the enemy had been reinforcing by armour hitherto held in reserve in the south. In the area south-west of Jebel Bou Aoukaz a determined attack by enemy infantry and tanks was repulsed with the loss of 14 tanks, 12 of which (2 Mark VIs, 9 Mark IVs and 1 Mark III) were destroyed by our sappers.

On 5th May after intense aerial bombardment, Jebel Bou Aoukaz was finally captured by the British 1st Division, and the enemy was thereby deprived of his last strong position on the right of his central sector. The road to Tunis was now open, and the stage set for the final assault.





Digitized by Google



FOUGHT THEIR WAY TO THE MOUNTAIN CRESTS AND REST HERE ABOVE KELBINE.

Digitized by Google



BOMBS GO DOWN to destroy enemy aircraft on the big El Aouina airfield at Tunis as the Allied armies prepare for the final assault. During this attack, made by bombers of the American Twelfth Air Force, fighters and transports were trying to take off. Great plumes of smoke rise from a cluster of enemy aircraft in the centre foreground. The buildings and the airfield were completely covered by the attack. Returning crews could see the smoke 80 miles away.

Digitized by Google

9. THE FINAL ASSAULT

General von Arnim had allowed for the possible breaching of his Enfidaville–Kef Abbed line, and had prepared for that eventuality. He had been ordered to prolong resistance to the utmost and the only way in which he could do so was by shortening his line, whatever sacrifice that might entail. Therefore Bizerta was to be evacuated, or at most a " suicide squad " was to be left in the town to hold the landward defences and delay the U.S. troops. Tunis also was to be evacuated. The new perimeter was to run from Hammam Lif through Créteville to Zaghouan, where a long chain of hills would give him the advantage of terrain, and then to follow the original line along the Enfidaville range. Behind this holding line was the Cape Bon peninsula, to which he had been transferring great dumps of supplies and ammunition, enough to last his forces for perhaps two months ; he might even be able to replenish these stores from overseas by means of the landing jetties that he had built at Kelibia. His forces in the north, falling back on the plain on the western shore of the Gulf of Tunis, could easily and rapidly be moved south along the good roads leading past Tunis to Hammam Lif, and even a last-moment decision would still allow of the manœuvre being carried out without serious interruption.

General von Arnim did not allow for the presence of three British armoured divisions instead of two on the Medjez el Bab front. He did not allow for the tactics which, when once his prepared defences had been breached, sent the armour forward without regard to its flanks—not to occupy positions but to break up the manœuvres of the enemy infantry. Both the weight and the speed of the Allied attack, when it came, took him completely by surprise.

On 6th May, at 3 a.m., after intense artillery preparation, the First Army launched a direct attack on Tunis from the region immediately east of Medjez el Bab. By 10.30 a.m. infantry of the 4th British Division on the right, and the 4th Indian Division on the left, had reached their initial objectives at Bordj Frendj and captured them

OPENING THE LAST FIERCE BATTLE FOR TUNIS, BRITISH INFANTRY ADVANCE TO TAKE A RIDGE COMMANDED BY ENEMY MORTARS AND ARTILLERY.



Digitized by Google

after meeting with minor opposition. British armour, the 6th Armoured Division on the right, and the 7th Armoured Division on the left, were then passed through the infantry and drove north-eastwards astride the Tunis road. A tank battle developed south of Furna and the enemy were driven off to the south-east by the 6th Armoured Division. Infantry was quickly brought up to cover the exposed right flank. In spite of stiffening resistance, Massicault was captured in the afternoon by the 7th Armoured Division and many prisoners from different units were taken. In the evening another tank battle was fought north of Massicault and the enemy, who had 20 tanks of the 15th Panzer Division, was driven away to the north-east. During this advance the Allied troops enjoyed magnificent support from the Allied Air Forces which established such domination over the enemy that our men were unmolested from the air.

Farther north, the U.S. Second Corps continued its progress. While the U.S. 34th Infantry Division advancing eastwards north of the Jebel Lanserine moved in the direction of Tebourba, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division engaged the enemy along the line of the Oued El Tine, south of Mateur. After fighting heavily all day the U.S. 1st Armoured Division, operating north-east from Mateur, captured the high ground commanding the road to Ferryville. The U.S. 9th Infantry Division, operating north of Garaet Achkel, were within nine miles of Bizerta, after clearing the enemy from Jebel Ech Cheniti.

On 7th May the advance continued. In the south, the French 19th Corps captured Pont du Fahs and some important high ground to the east of the town.

The enemy was found to have withdrawn from the region north of Sebkra el Kourzia and the British 1st Armoured Division, following up closely, advanced and reached the region of Bir Meherga, on the main Pont du Fahs–Tunis road. Farther north an enemy strongpoint south of La Mornaghia was reduced by the 6th Armoured Division, while the high ground to the south was occupied by infantry. To the north of the Massicault–Tunis road, St. Cyprien was captured at 8.30 a.m. by the 7th Armoured Division and the advance continued on Le Bardo, a suburb of Tunis. In the afternoon, after severe street fighting in the suburbs, the town of Tunis was entered and occupied. First into the town were the Derbyshire Yeomanry and 11th Hussars, closely followed by the 22nd Armoured Brigade and infantry of the 78th Division.

Meanwhile, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division forced a crossing of the Oued el Tine, south-east of Mateur, while the U.S. 1st Armoured Division occupied Ferryville. Then, on the same day, 7th May, the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, advancing on the north of the Garaet Achkel, broke down all remaining enemy resistance and in the afternoon swept into Bizerta. The first troops to enter the town were the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalions.

With the capture of Bizerta the U.S. Second Corps concluded an operation of great difficulty in which they had achieved outstanding success. They had gone into action within 48 hours of their arrival, in an area practically unknown to them, and over notoriously difficult ground. In this area, where the First Army had for months encountered the most stubborn opposition, the U.S. Second Corps launched an attack which was stubbornly maintained until none of the enemy opposing them was left.



BLAZING AXIS VEHICLES mark the enemy's line of retreat as he is forced back towards Tunis. Here, in an orchard, Italian cars and lorries burn themselves out.

ARMOURED BATTLES RAGE ASTRIDE THE TUNIS ROAD AS THE BRITISH ARMOURED DIVISIONS



Digitized by Google



WRECKED BY BRITISH ARTILLERY, this German tank had been fighting under cover of a hedge surrounding a German cemetery on the outskirts of Tunis. The 6th and 7th Armoured Divisions had fought to the suburbs of the capital by the morning of 7th May, little more than 24 hours after the final offensive opened.

PASS THROUGH THE GAP FORCED OPEN BY THE INFANTRY AND DRIVE TOWARDS THE CAPITAL. THIS CHURCHILL TANK IS IN ACTION NEAR FRENDJ.

Digitized by Google



N R.A.F. SENTRY stands on guard amid the wreckage of enemy aircraft on El Aouina airfield at Tunis. British orces entered Tunis on the afternoon of 7th May. Although resisting bitterly, the enemy was confused by their speed.



A STREET DUEL is waged between a Sherman tank crew and enemy forces holding a half-built block



LAST ISLANDS OF RESISTANCE in Tunis were overcome as Allied forces cautiously pushed forward.



ENEMY PRISONERS, mostly Germans, are marched away as all fighting in Tunis ends. The streets are

Digitized by Google



of flats in Tunis. Severe street fighting took place in the suburbs and the centre of the town before it fell.



Here the last shots are fired by infantry engaging a group of enemy snipers from the shelter of a Bren carrier.



crowded with civilians who streamed from their homes to watch the surrender and welcome the Allied forces.



AMERICAN SOLDIERS took Bizerta on the same day that Tunis fell to British forces. Here also the enemy was caught by the speed of the break through. While scouts reconnoitre, this U.S. patrol waits to advance.

Digitized by Google





THE SMILING MEN. A Churchill threads its way through Tunis crowds at the head of a long procession of trucks and tanks.

Digitized by Google

0. THE COLLAPSE OF THE AXIS ARMIES

The capture in one day of both Bizerta and Tunis was enough to create a world nsation, but it was wellnigh eclipsed by hat immediately followed—the complete llapse, in the space of a few days, of the tire Axis Army. This Army was still a werful force, and much of it, not having en engaged in the fighting of the past few ys, had retained its formations and orale intact. The blow which had befallen e troops had not been unforeseen by the igh Command, and plans for the next age of the struggle had duly been worked out. It was, therefore, difficult to explain the pitiful debacle that ensued.

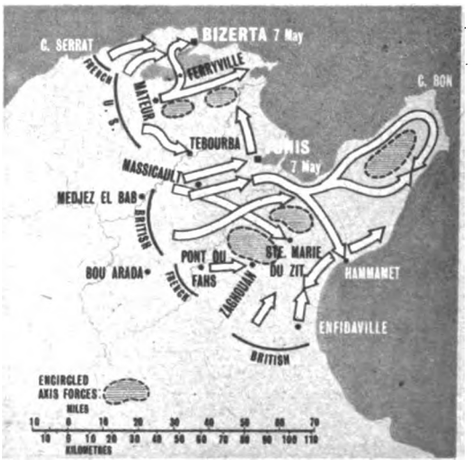
The real reason was the extraordinary speed with which the blow was dealt and its results exploited. When our tanks entered Tunis, in the centre of the town German staff officers were drinking coffee in the restaurants, completely unaware of danger. The Axis forces in the north had fallen back, in accordance with plan, on to the coastal plain of the lower Merjerda, whence they were to march south to the new defensive perimeter ; now their road was cut. So far from wasting time in Tunis, the 7th Armoured Division switched north along the Bizerta road to counter any advance from that quarter, while the 6th Armoured Division turned south along the road to Hammam Lif. Not content with cutting the enemy's forces in two, General Alexander was determined to stultify the enemy's plans by separating the still unbroken army in the south from its prepared base on the Cape Bon peninsula. This was in fact to be the result of the next few days' operations. The proposed lines of defence could never be manned, for they were pierced before the enemy could reach them. The Axis troops in the field ran short of petrol, although petrol dumps had been established in advance: some were short of food and ammunition, although there was a two months' supply on the peninsula: between them and the material required to prolong the campaign were the British tanks with British infantry riding on them. All communications broke down and utter chaos ensued ; escape by sea was impossible, and although some formations, ignorant of what was happening elsewhere, still offered resistance, the majority were only too ready to surrender.

This is the story of what took place. The force that had fallen back from Bizerta, with orders to move southwards, became isolated in the Medjerda valley and the coastal region between Bizerta and Tunis. It was then rapidly reduced by the U.S. Second Corps and the 7th Armoured Division ; the Manteuffel Group, the German 334th Infantry Division and the 15th Panzer Division, a company of the 504th Heavy Tank Battalion, and the 20th Anti-Aircraft Division surrendered unconditionally with their divisional commanders and staff. This was on 9th May.

On the same day, the British 1st Armoured Division captured Crétéville and pushed on four miles to the east. Meanwhile, Guards had captured the high ground south of Hammam Lif and the 6th Armoured Division broke through. In the rush of events this break-through at Hammam Lif did not perhaps seem very remarkable, but it can now be seen that this brilliant action finally frustrated any further serious resistance by the Axis forces in Tunisia.

HE AXIS ARMIES were cut off from their prepared base in Cape Bon peninsula by the speed with hich the main blow was exploited. The prisoner on the left is General Cramer of the Afrika Korps.





6—13 MAY. British armour breaks through to Tunis, and Bizerta falls to U.S. forces. Collapse follows.

Digitized by Google



GENERAL VON ARNIM, THE CAPTURED COMMANDER OF ALL AXIS FORCES IN NORTH AFRICA, DESCENDS FROM AN AIRCRAFT AT ALLIED HEADQUARTE

Digitized by Google



THE GERMAN 90th LIGHT DIVISION surrendered to the New Zealand Division. Here its commander, General von Sponeck (left), is interviewed by General Freyberg, the New Zealand commander (opposite him).



AXIS AIRMEN captured by the Royal Navy as they them to prisoner-of-war camps. Close blockade by naval



FIVE GERMAN GENERALS captured at the front pass across the Allied airfield to which they have been flown. Altogether 15 German and 7 Italian generals were included among the prisoners taken in North Africa.



LAST TO SURRENDER was Marshal Messe, commander the Afrika Korps. Seated on the left, he is conversing

Continuing their advance, on 10th May the 6th Armoured Division occupied Soliman and Menzel Bou Zelfa ; and by evening advanced elements had entered the outskirts of Hammamet, thereby completely separating the enemy forces in the area of Zaghouan from those which had retreated into Cape Bon. On 11th May the 6th Armoured Division continued its advance through Hammamet, and, fanning out north and south along the coast, reached Nabeul and Bou Ficha respectively. Meanwhile, infantry of the British 4th Division came up to relieve the armour at Menzel Bou Zelfa, and, dividing its forces, it sent out patrols along the north coast ; these linked up with others that had gone along the south coast, and so completed the circuit of the Cape Bon peninsula. These patrols met little opposition, and thus, at one stroke, the peninsula was secured. together with all the stores which had been accumulated in it in preparation for a siege.

The enemy forces were now disposed thus: between Enfidaville and Bou Ficha were the German 90th Light Division; in the Zaghouan–Saouaf area, the German 164th Division ; east of Bou Ficha, the Italian Superga Division and remnants of the Italian Panzer Army ; between Grombalia and Ste Marie du Zit, remnants of the German 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions (the latter without tanks) and of the 501st Heavy Tank Battalion. All these were completely enclosed between the Eighth and First Armies. East of Grombalia, at the base of the Cape Bon peninsula, were the remnants of the German 19th A/A Division and of the Hermann Göring Division, with a few tanks. These remnants were now enclosed between the British armoured forces which had reached Hammamet, the British armoured forces in the area of Grombalia, and the British Infantry in the area of Menzel Bou Zelfa.

In the evening of 11th May 22,000 of the enemy troops of the Pfeiffer Group, consisting of the Italian Superga Division and the battle group of the German 21st Panzer Division facing the Division du Maroc of the 19th Corps surrendered unconditionally to General Mathinet. This accounted for all opposition from Saouaf to north of Zaghouan.

During the morning of 12th May the enemy in front of the Eighth Army continued to resist stubbornly and even made counter-attacks against the Fighting French 1st Division ; these were all repulsed. The 6th Armoured Division linked up with the Eighth Army in the coastal sector, and at 3.30 p.m. a strong bombing attack on the enemy encircled in the region north of Enfidaville induced the Italian 1st Army to

Digitized by Google



tried to escape by sea march to the trucks that will take light forces made evacuation impossible.



of the 1st Italian Army, which included the remains of with General Montgomery, to whom he surrendered.



TUNISIA, which had a war, also had a people. The war has passed; the people stay—freed from two and a half years of Axis rule. "Justice must be done", "Our victory is freedom's victory", say the posters.

ask for terms of surrender. On that day General von Arnim was captured near Ste Marie du Zit by the Royal Sussex Regiment with the 4th Indian Division, which had advanced from the west. On 13th May, Marshal Messe surrendered unconditionally with the remainder of the Axis forces. The number of prisoners captured since 5th May was 248,000, including 15 German generals and seven Italian Generals. In addition, the casualties inflicted on the enemy by the First Army and the American and French troops since the start of the campaign, and by the Eighth Army since the battle of Mareth, were 50,000 killed, and 43,000 prisoners. Only 638 men escaped, mostly by air, for the close in-shore blockade by light forces of the Royal Navy had made escape, let alone evacuation, impossible. The battle of Tunisia had therefore cost the enemy 340,000 men.

Between 8th November, 1942, and 7th May, 1943, 1,696 enemy aircraft were destroyed in combat or by anti-aircraft fire for the loss of 657 Allied planes. After the collapse 633 aircraft were found on the ground.

Ninety-five enemy ships were sunk by air attack. In addition, submarine and light forces of the Royal Navy exacted a toll of Axis shipping that mounted daily. Between the start of operations in North Africa and the end of April, 47 ships were sunk by submarines and 42 by surface forces.

On 13th May General Alexander sent the following telegram to No. 10, Downing Street:—

"Prime Minister, Sir,—It is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores."

Military historians will probably rank the victory of General Eisenhower's British, American and French forces, so tersely described in this telegram, as the most perfect example of a battle achieving that at which all commanders aim, the ending of a war by the total elimination of the enemy. For nearly two thousand years Cannæ had no parallel in its completeness, but Hannibal's success in the field did not end a campaign. Tannenberg, with which the Germans claimed to have eclipsed Cannæ, though it broke an army, did not literally annihilate it, and the war went on. General Wavell's campaigns in East Africa and Libya each ended with the complete destruction of the enemy's forces in the field, but this was the result of a succession of blows, not of a single resounding victory. Tunis, the last battle of the war in Africa, will stand as the classic example of complete achievement.

Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google

ACRES OF PRISONERS. The campaign in Tunisia cost the enemy 340,000 men.



Digitized by Google



"Under your leadership, forces diverse in nationality and race have been knit into one united and successful whole. Their task has not been easy, and the resistance of the enemy has been determined and desperate. But now, with the capture of Tunis and Bizerta, your campaign is almost concluded; the last enemy forces in Africa are being captured or destroyed, and the debt of Dunkirk repaid."

FROM THE KING'S MESSAGE OF 9TH MAY, 1943, TO GENERAL EISENHOWER, SUPREME COMMANDER, ALLIED FORCES, NORTH AFRICA

Digitized by Google

Date Due

MAR 1 6 1954

DEC 8 1958

APR 2 6 1962

MAY 1 7 1962

DEC 5 1968

D 766.99 *
T 8 G 7

MAR 1 6 1954

D766.99* 699332
T8G7

Digitized by Google

The Ohio State University
3 2435 01176 4438
D766.99T8G7 001
TUNISIA

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY BOOK DEPOSITORY
D AISLE SECT SHLF SIDE POS ITEM C
8 03 19 10 7 05 006 1

Digitized by Google